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Old Voices

By Howard Weeden

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OLD VOICES

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BANDANNA BALLADS
SONGS OF THE OLD SOUTH

"A BOHEMIAN"

OLD VOICES

"For love of unforgotten times"

By

Howard Weeden

New York
Doubleday, Page & Company
1904

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Published, September, 1904

Affectionately Dedicated

To

Joel Chandler Harris

By

His grateful friend

The Author

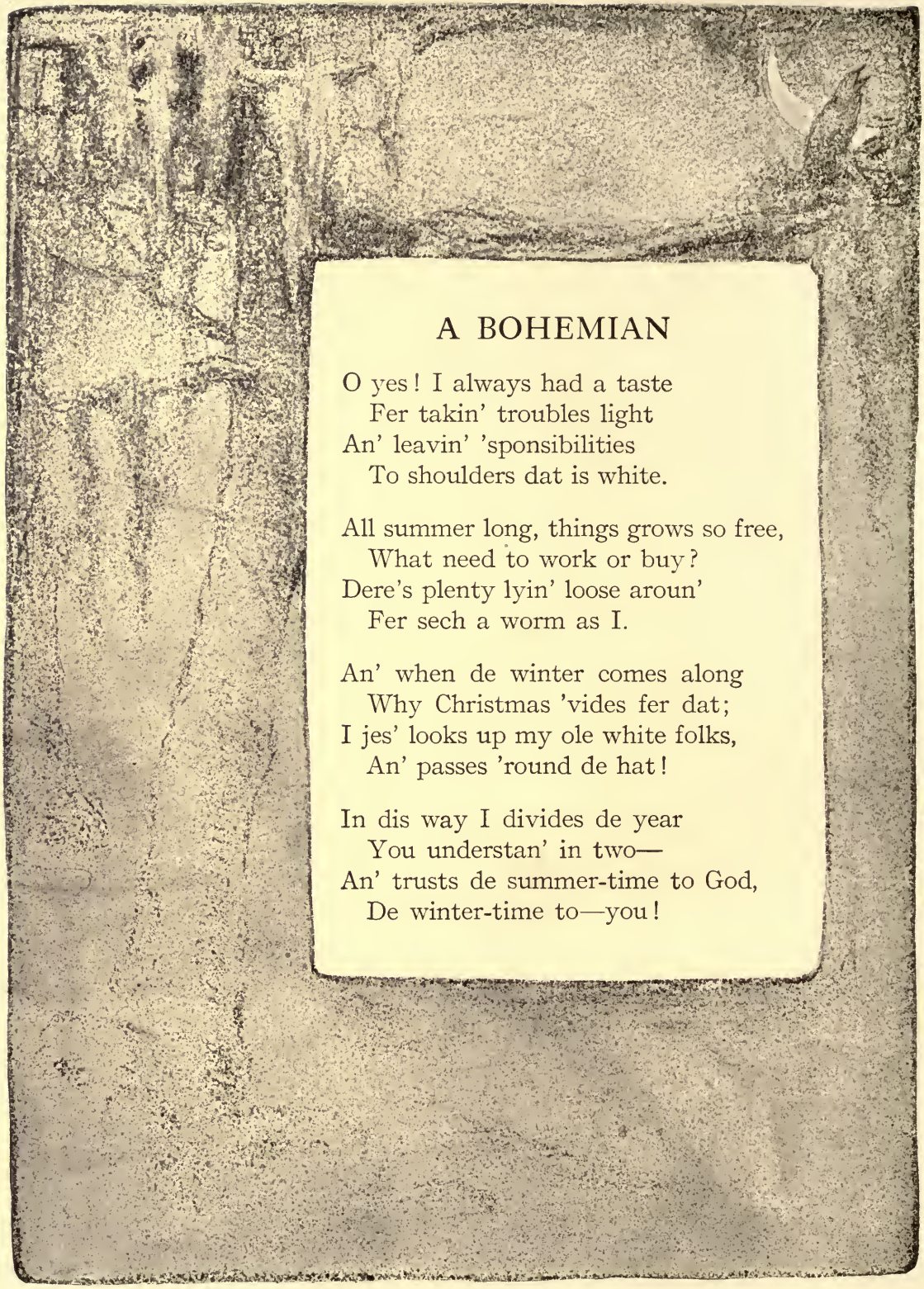
HERE is hope for nobler things
If such the future brings:
But O, here's love for everything
That long ago took wing!

CONTENTS

A Bohemian
Memory's Feast
Important News
A Toilet
Pantry and Pulpit
Ole Mistis' Way
The Old Biscuit Block
The Palate Wrop
Me and Mammy
Mimosa Blooms
An Old Garden
A Rose Song
Time
Christmas Etchings
The Rout
A Voice of the Night

The Angel of the Dark
A Study
A Mystic
A Waif
Acer Spades
The Problem
A Veteran
Vanity Fair

A Bohemian



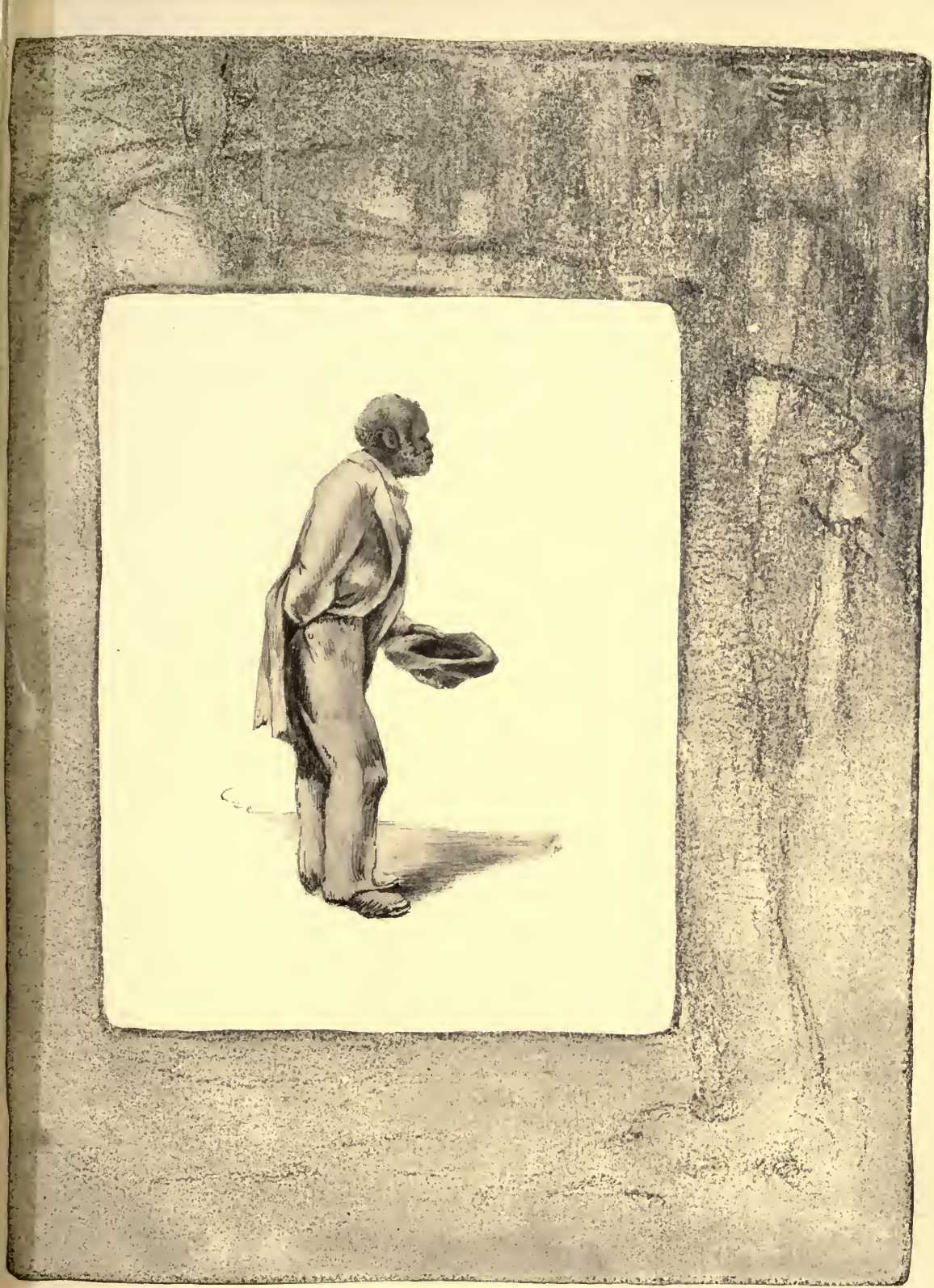
A BOHEMIAN

O yes! I always had a taste
  Fer takin' troubles light
An' leavin' 'sponsibilities
  To shoulders dat is white.

All summer long, things grows so free,
  What need to work or buy?
Dere's plenty lyin' loose aroun'
  Fer sech a worm as I.

An' when de winter comes along
  Why Christmas 'vides fer dat;
I jes' looks up my ole white folks,
  An' passes 'round de hat!

In dis way I divides de year
  You understan' in two—
An' trusts de summer-time to God,
  De winter-time to—you!



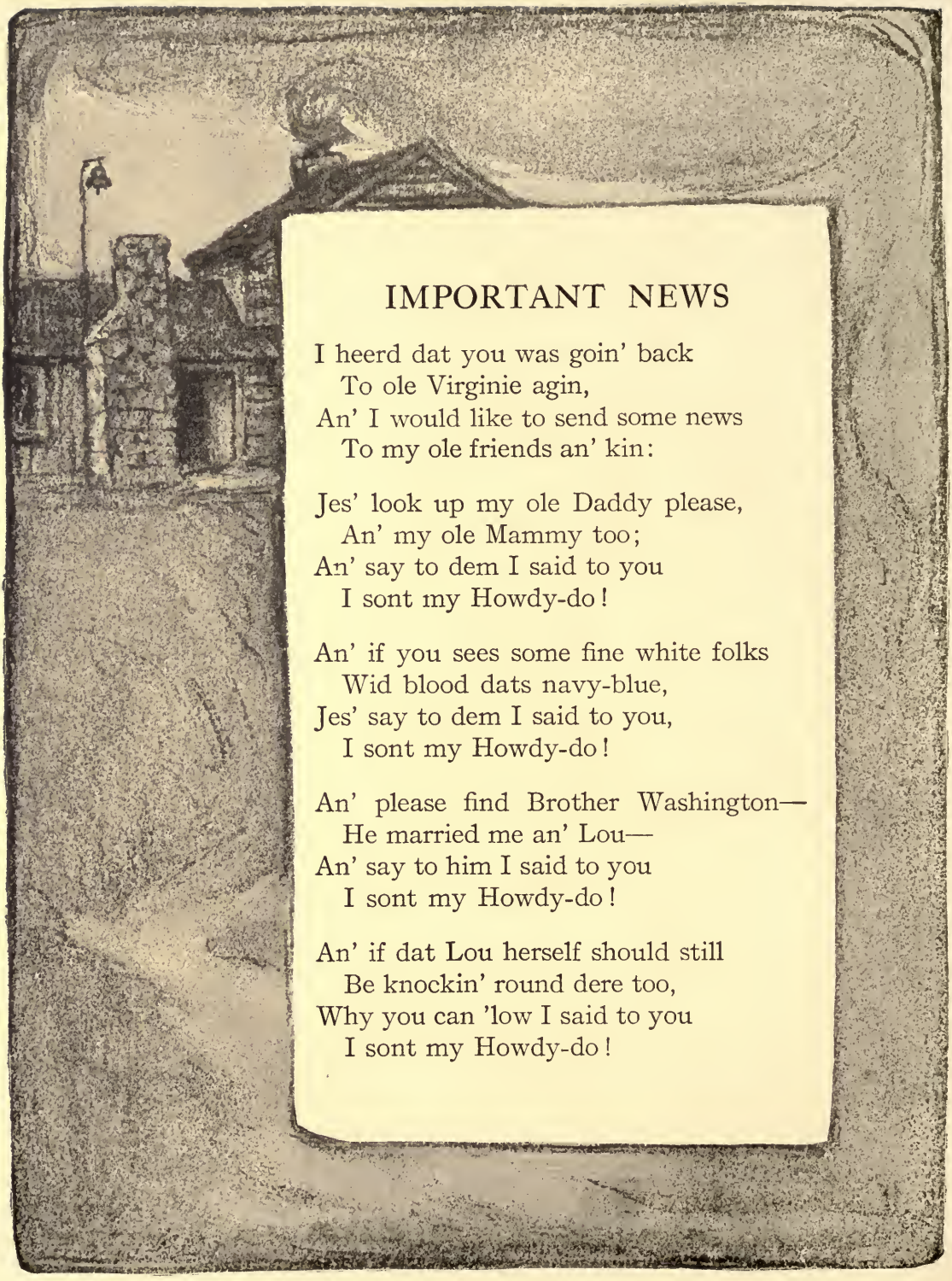
Memory's Feast

MEMORY'S FEAST

I'm sittin' here in Northern ease
  A eatin' baker's bread,
An' sayin' grace on by-gone meals
  I ate when Southern fed—
Dear gumbo, wid red pepper hot,
  Dear rice an' 'possum meat,
Dear smokin' hominy, rich corn-bread,
  An' beaten biscuit sweet!

Why, Lord! it's fillin' jes' to *think*
  'Bout nourishment like dat,
An' I can eat in dreams until
  I feels well-fed an' fat:
An' all de thanks I tries to give
  For dis here saw-dust bread,
Is jes' a grace to Memory—
  When I was Southern fed!

Important News



IMPORTANT NEWS

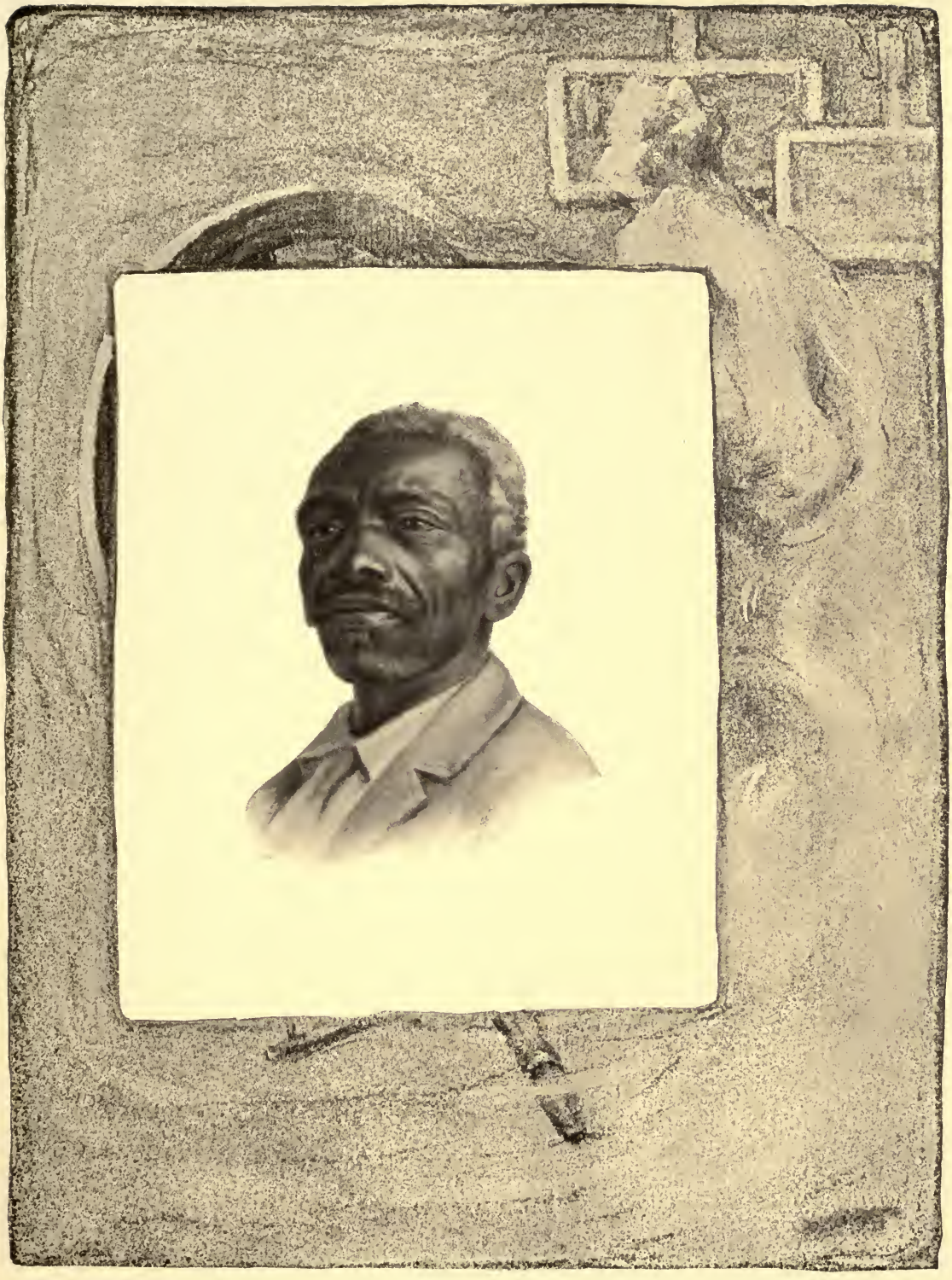
I heerd dat you was goin' back
To ole Virginie agin,
An' I would like to send some news
To my ole friends an' kin:

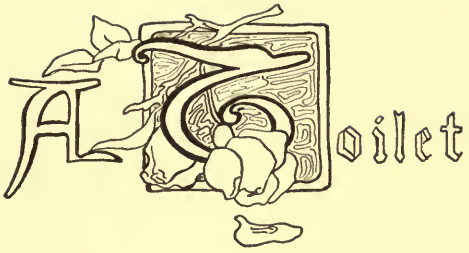
Jes' look up my ole Daddy please,
An' my ole Mammy too;
An' say to dem I said to you
I sont my Howdy-do!

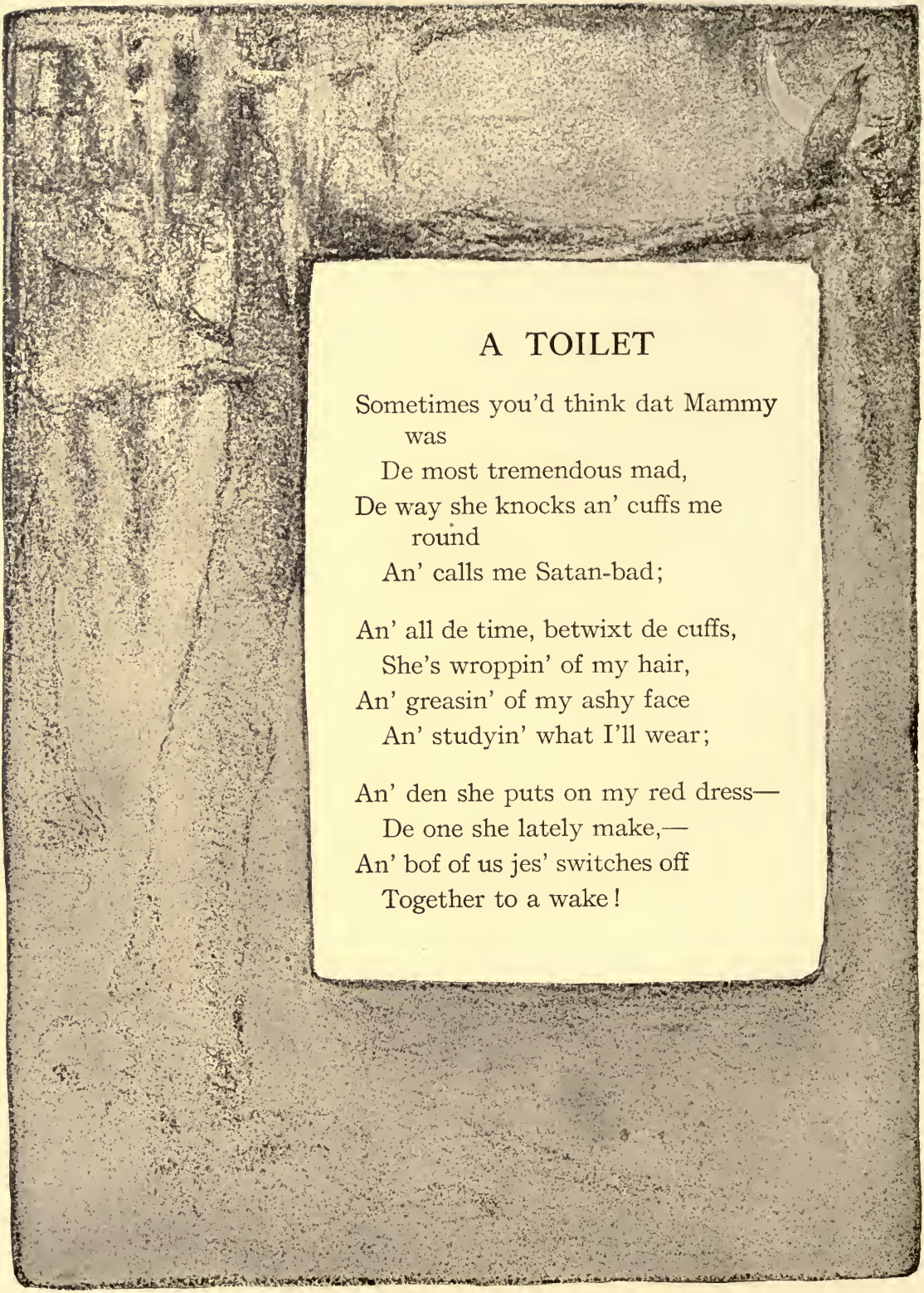
An' if you sees some fine white folks
Wid blood dats navy-blue,
Jes' say to dem I said to you,
I sont my Howdy-do!

An' please find Brother Washington—
He married me an' Lou—
An' say to him I said to you
I sont my Howdy-do!

An' if dat Lou herself should still
Be knockin' round dere too,
Why you can 'low I said to you
I sont my Howdy-do!




oilet



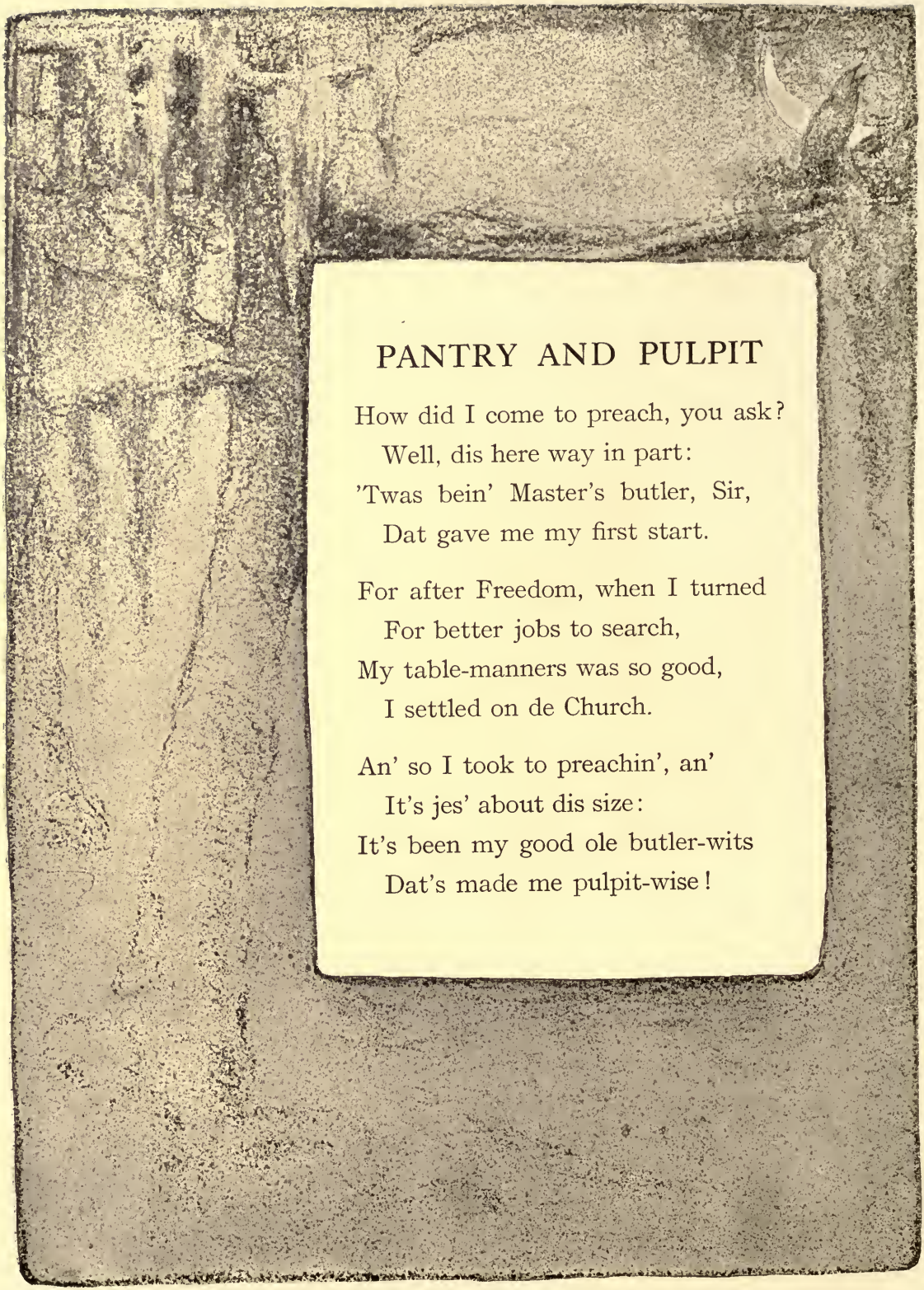
A TOILET

Sometimes you'd think dat Mammy
was
De most tremendous mad,
De way she knocks an' cuffs me
round
An' calls me Satan-bad;

An' all de time, betwixt de cuffs,
She's wroppin' of my hair,
An' greasin' of my ashy face
An' studyin' what I'll wear;

An' den she puts on my red dress—
De one she lately make,—
An' bof of us jes' switches off
Together to a wake!

Pantry and Pulpit

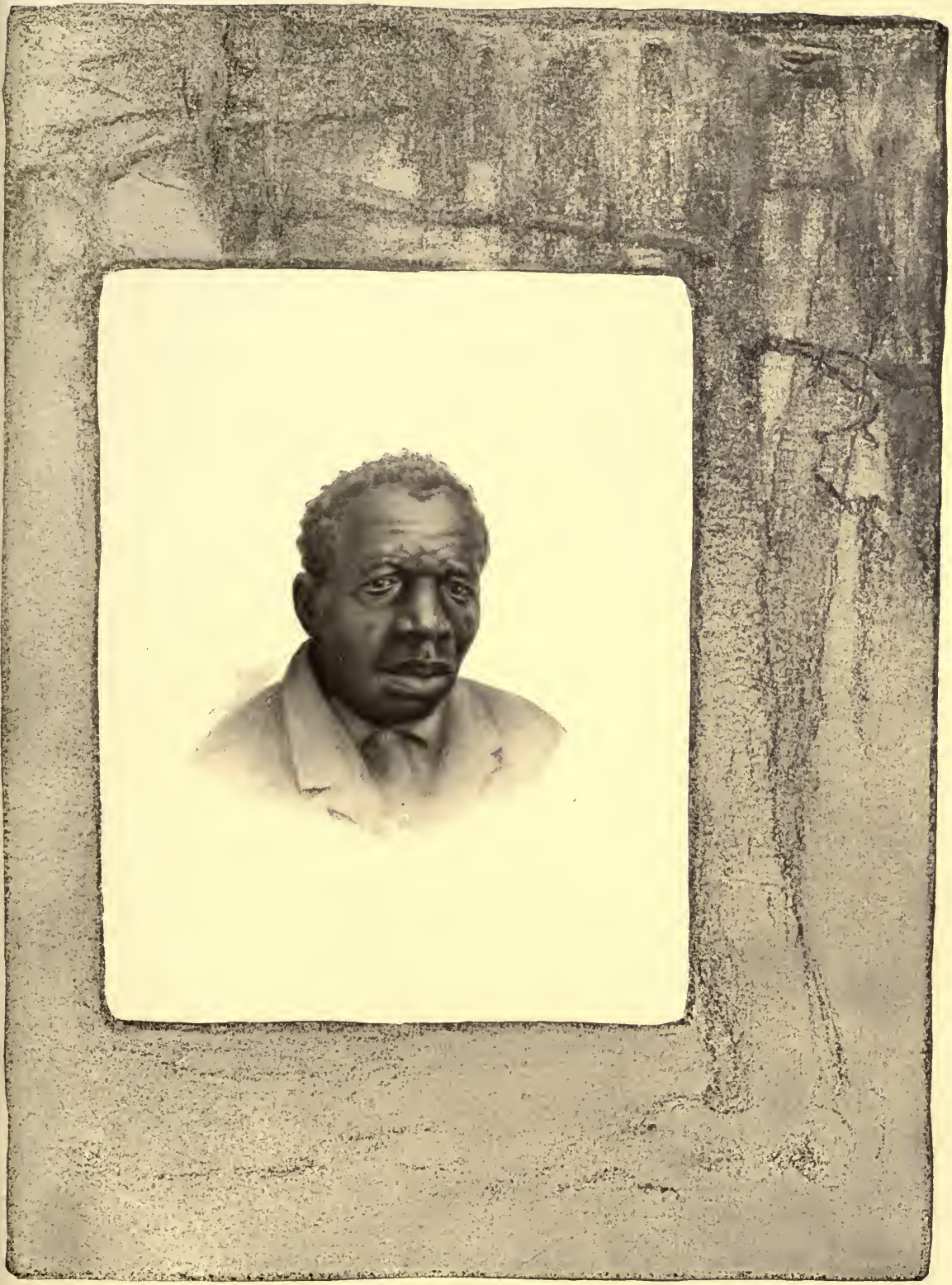


PANTRY AND PULPIT

How did I come to preach, you ask?
  Well, dis here way in part:
'Twas bein' Master's butler, Sir,
  Dat gave me my first start.

For after Freedom, when I turned
  For better jobs to search,
My table-manners was so good,
  I settled on de Church.

An' so I took to preachin', an'
  It's jes' about dis size:
It's been my good ole butler-wits
  Dat's made me pulpit-wise!



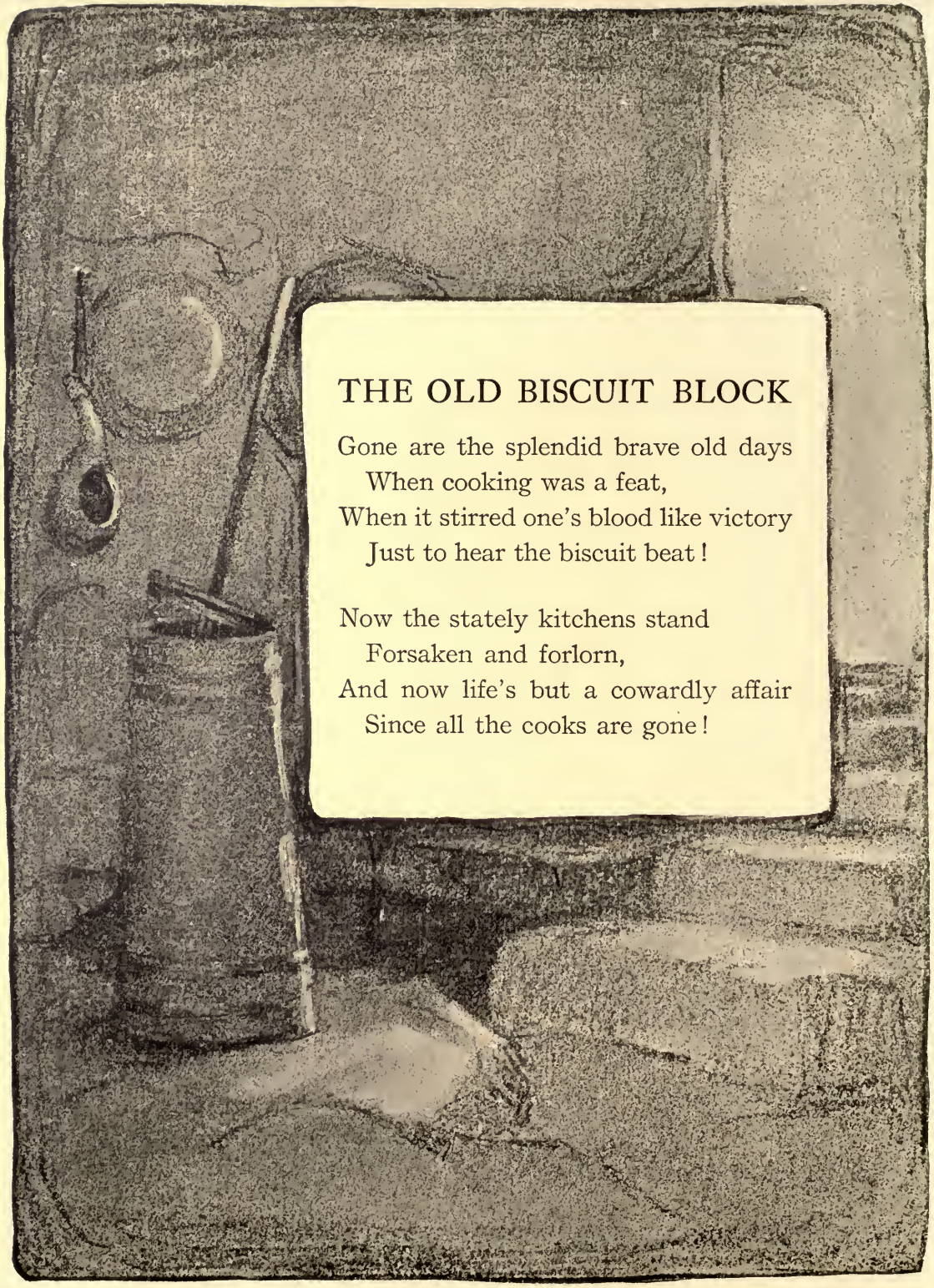
Ole Aristis' Way

OLE MISTIS' WAY

You flighty young folks needn't come
A-orderin' me no mo';
I'm sot in ways my ole Mis' taught
An' 'spects to stay jes' so.
It's hurry wid you all de time
As if 'twas jedgment day,
An' I am called of no account
'Case I ain't made dat way.

But age an' slowness used to be
Respected in de race,
An' I wa'n't asked to be so swif'
When ole Mis' set de pace.
An' dere wa'n't nothin' in dem days
Of all dis haste an' noise,
For 'twasn't manners to be fast
When me an' Mis' was boys !

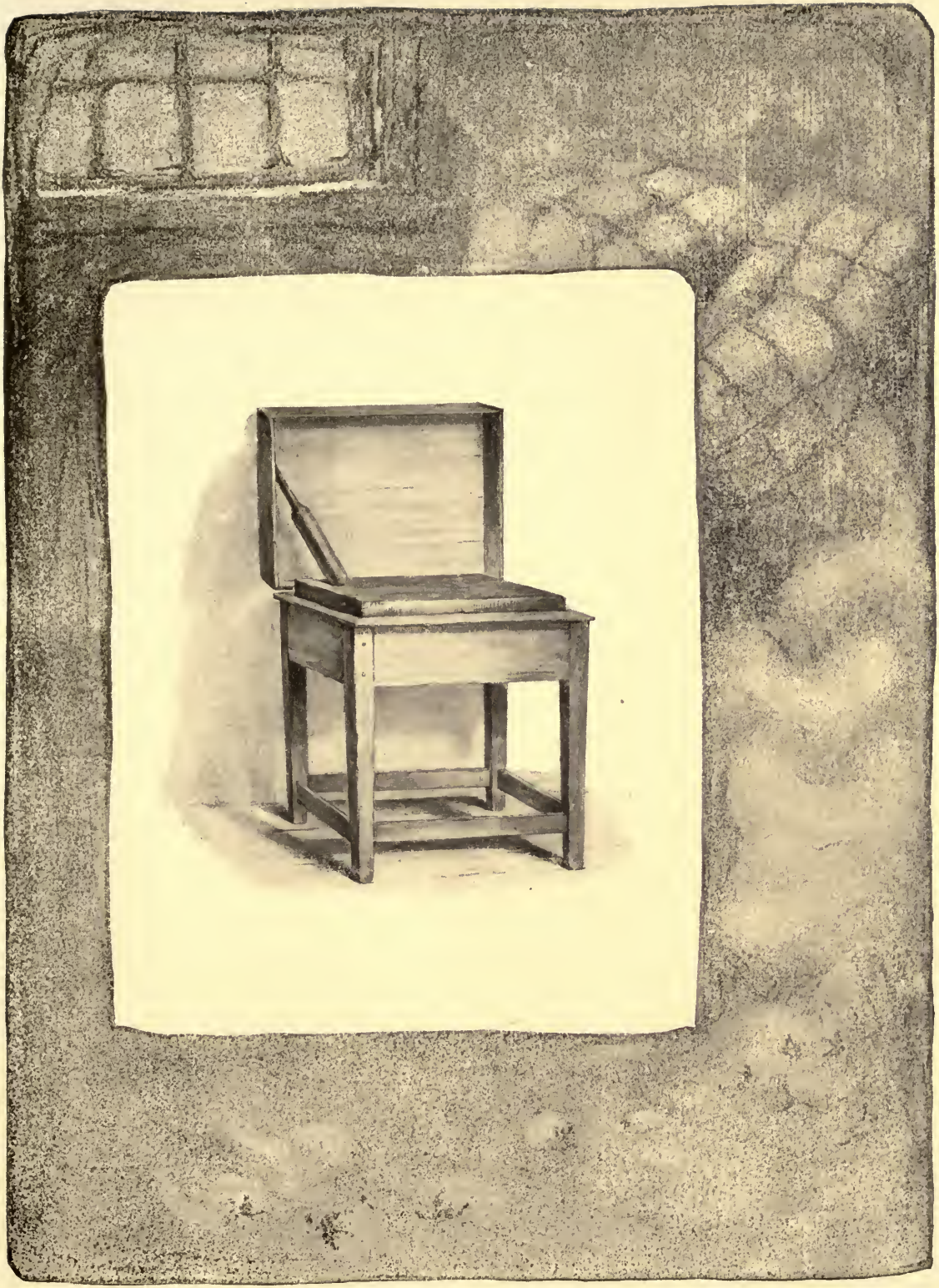
The Old Biscuit Block



THE OLD BISCUIT BLOCK

Gone are the splendid brave old days
When cooking was a feat,
When it stirred one's blood like victory
Just to hear the biscuit beat!

Now the stately kitchens stand
Forsaken and forlorn,
And now life's but a cowardly affair
Since all the cooks are gone!



The Palate Crop

THE PALATE WROP

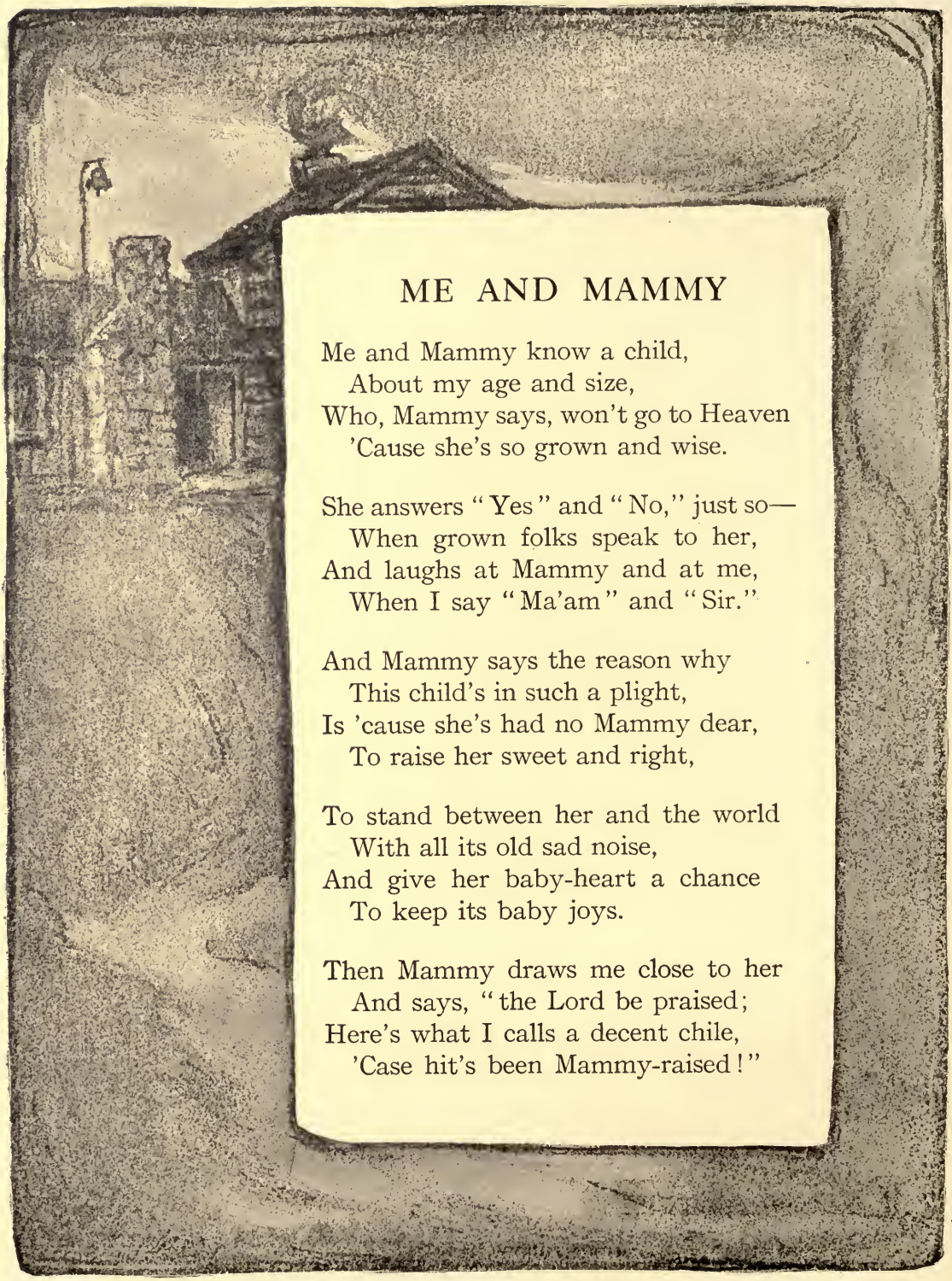
Lord, ain't you never heerd before
  About a nigger's palate-wrop?
Why, here is one right on my head,
  Jes' in de middle of de top.

My palate got down bad one time,
  So Mammy said she'd put a stop
To *dat*, an' tuk my head in han'
  An' found de right place for de
    wrop.

An' den she twis' an' twis' an' twis',
  An' den she wrop an' wrop an'
    wrop,
Till after while de palate flew
  Back to its right place wid a flop!

So, if your palate should git down,
  Do as I tell you, and I thinks—
But what I talkin 'bout?—You's
    white
  An' got no Mammy, an' no kinks!

Me and Sammy



ME AND MAMMY

Me and Mammy know a child,
  About my age and size,
Who, Mammy says, won't go to Heaven
  'Cause she's so grown and wise.

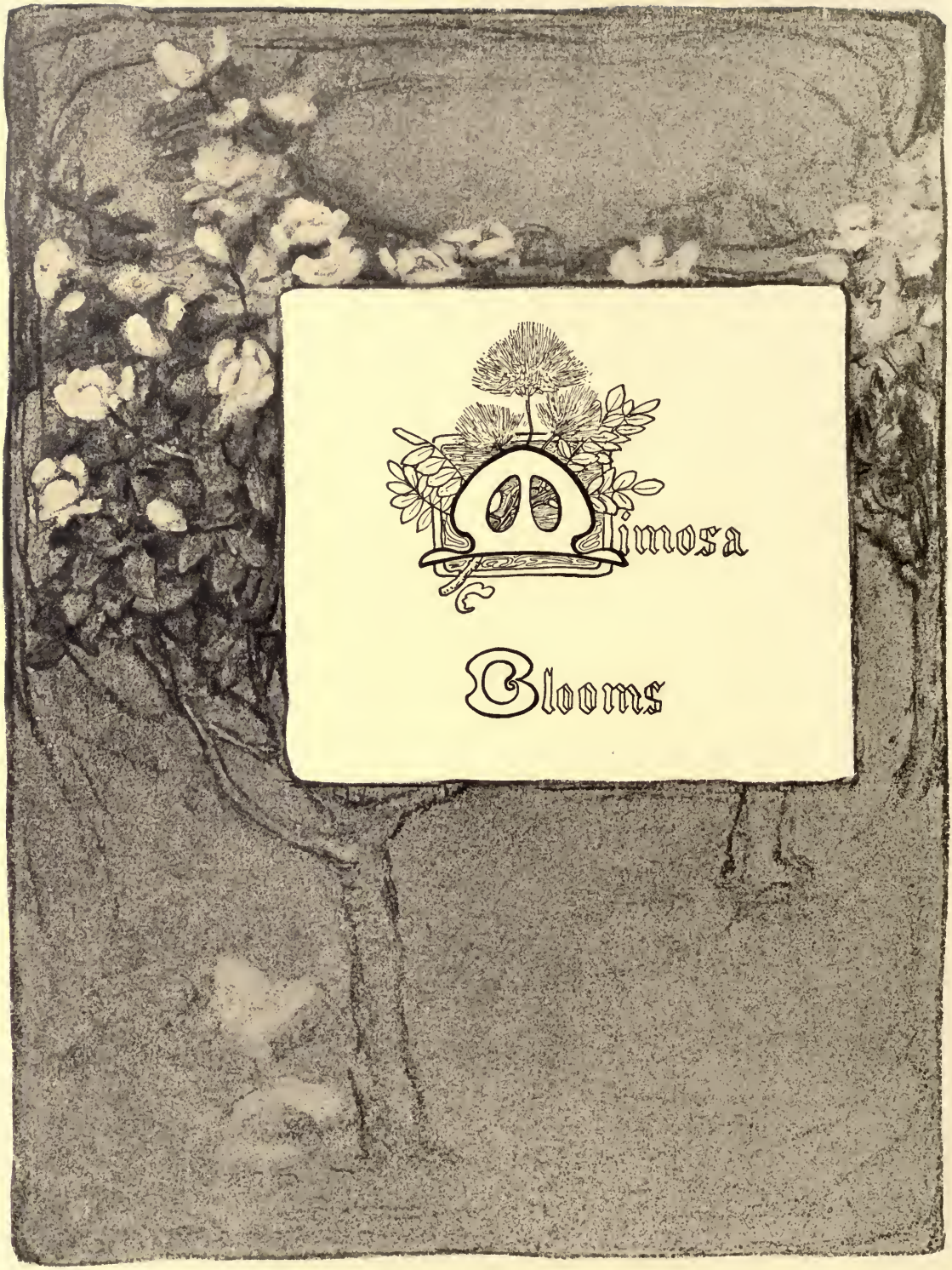
She answers "Yes" and "No," just so—
  When grown folks speak to her,
And laughs at Mammy and at me,
  When I say "Ma'am" and "Sir."

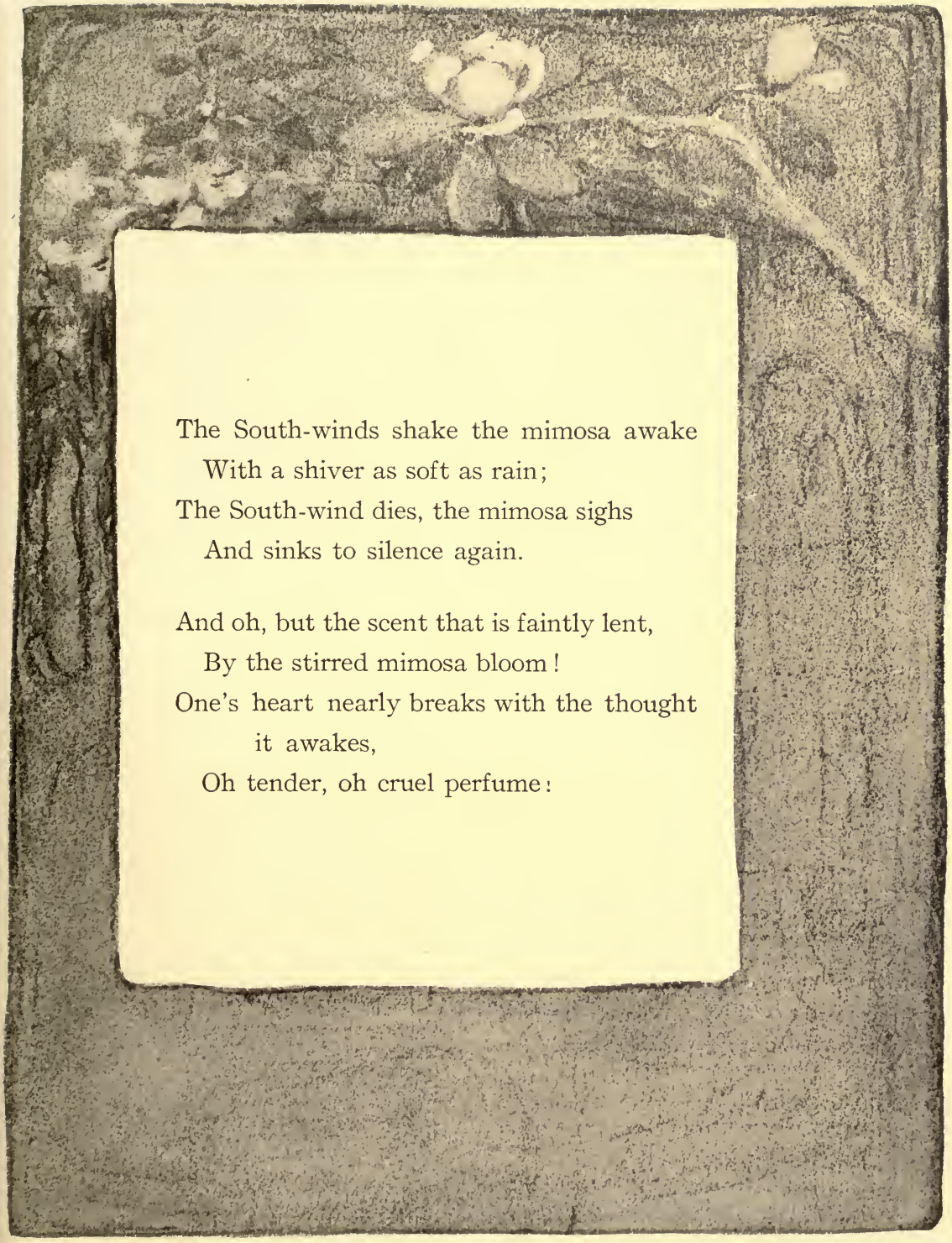
And Mammy says the reason why
  This child's in such a plight,
Is 'cause she's had no Mammy dear,
  To raise her sweet and right,

To stand between her and the world
  With all its old sad noise,
And give her baby-heart a chance
  To keep its baby joys.

Then Mammy draws me close to her
  And says, "the Lord be praised;
Here's what I calls a decent chile,
  'Case hit's been Mammy-raised!"

Mimosa Blooms


Limosa
Blooms



The South-winds shake the mimosa awake
With a shiver as soft as rain;
The South-wind dies, the mimosa sighs
And sinks to silence again.

And oh, but the scent that is faintly lent,
By the stirred mimosa bloom!
One's heart nearly breaks with the thought
it awakes,
Oh tender, oh cruel perfume:

An Old Garden

An Old
Garden

AN OLD GARDEN

I wonder if your memory holds
A garden old like mine—
Within its midst, a summer-house
As lovely as a shrine?

Around *mine* bloomed a world of flowers,
That scented every breeze;
And all life's noises have not drowned
The murmur of its bees.

And where the roses thickest grew
And bloomed the deepest red,
A group of lonely head-stones marked
Some long-forgotten Dead.

And there we children lingered oft
And mused upon each grave,
With all the passion for the Past
A happy Present gave.

And now another Past has crept
About the old, and spread—
Till nothing but a Verse will bloom
In that old garden dead!

A Rose Song

Song

A ROSE SONG

When Sylvia wears a snowy rose
  Upon her lovely breast,
I marvel that the rose remains
  So white in such a nest:
I'd glow till every petal pale
  Had flushed to warmest pink
And show her in a splendid blush
  How deep a rose could think!

When Sylvia wears a crimson rose
  Above her dainty ear,
I wonder how the rose keeps calm
  With Sylvia's smile so near:
I'd loose me from the silken hair
  Where she had bade me lie,
And fall—all red and passionate—
  At Sylvia's feet to die!

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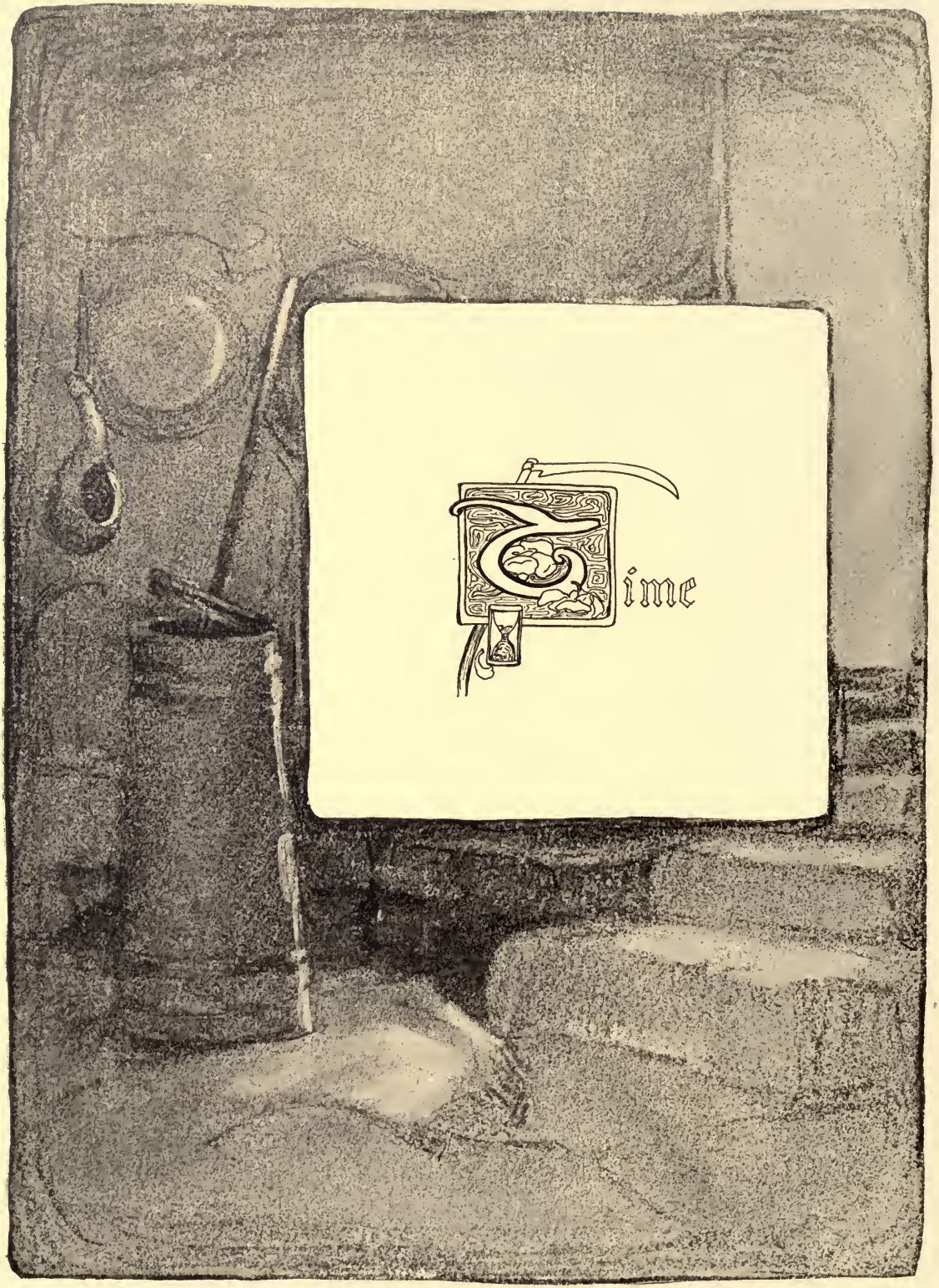
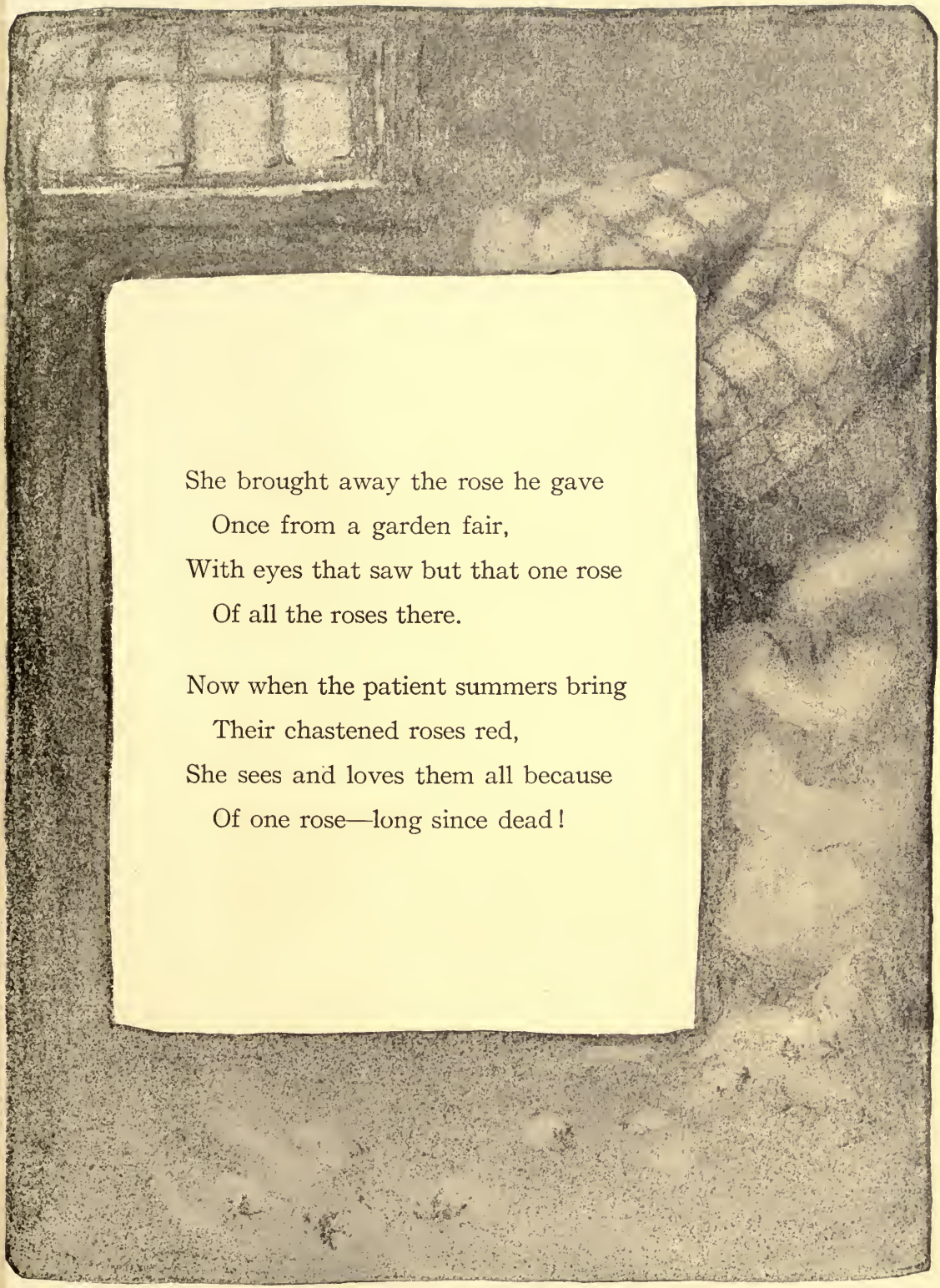

Time

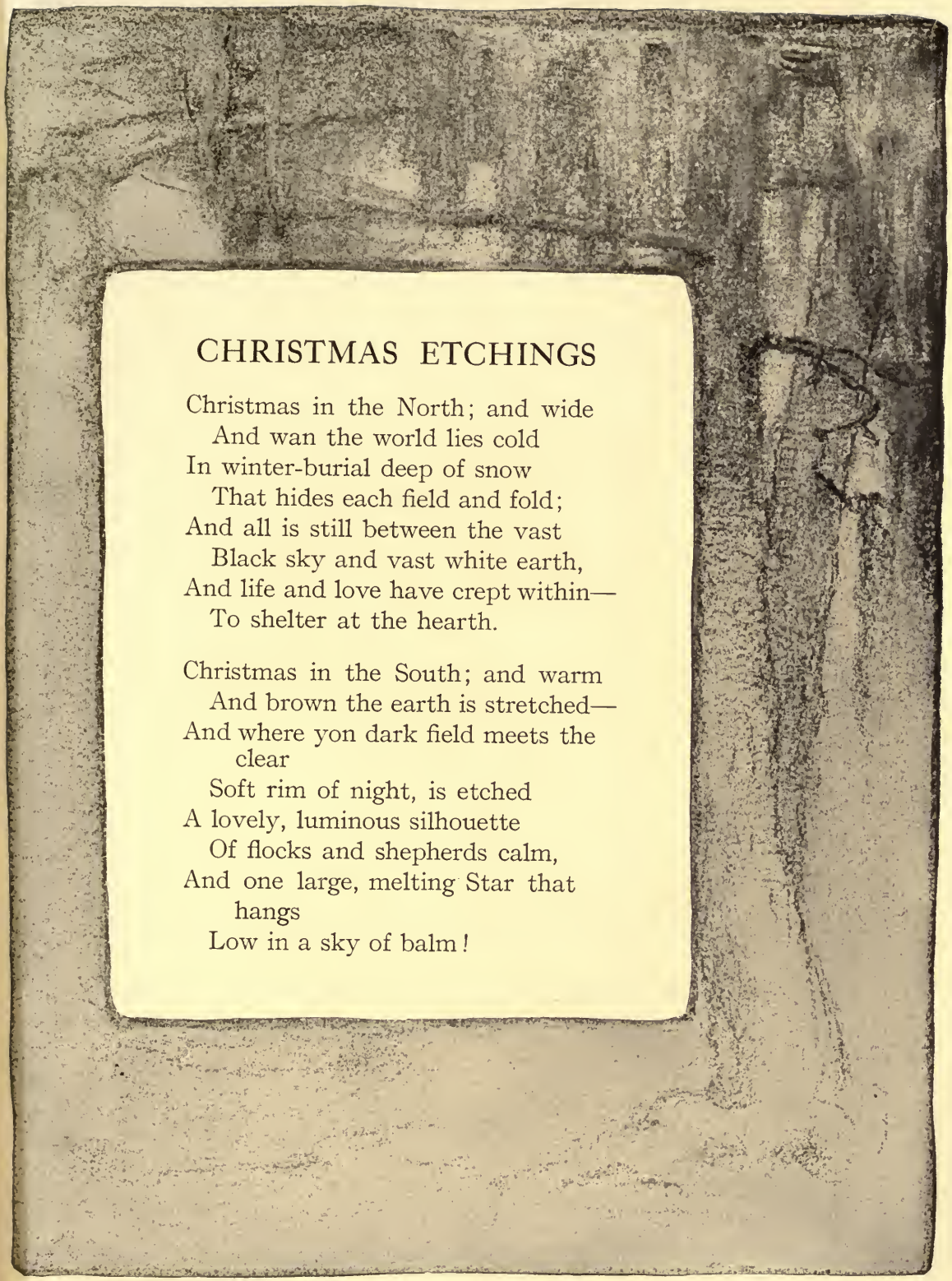


She brought away the rose he gave
  Once from a garden fair,
With eyes that saw but that one rose
  Of all the roses there.

Now when the patient summers bring
  Their chastened roses red,
She sees and loves them all because
  Of one rose—long since dead!

Christmas Etchings

Christmas
Etchings

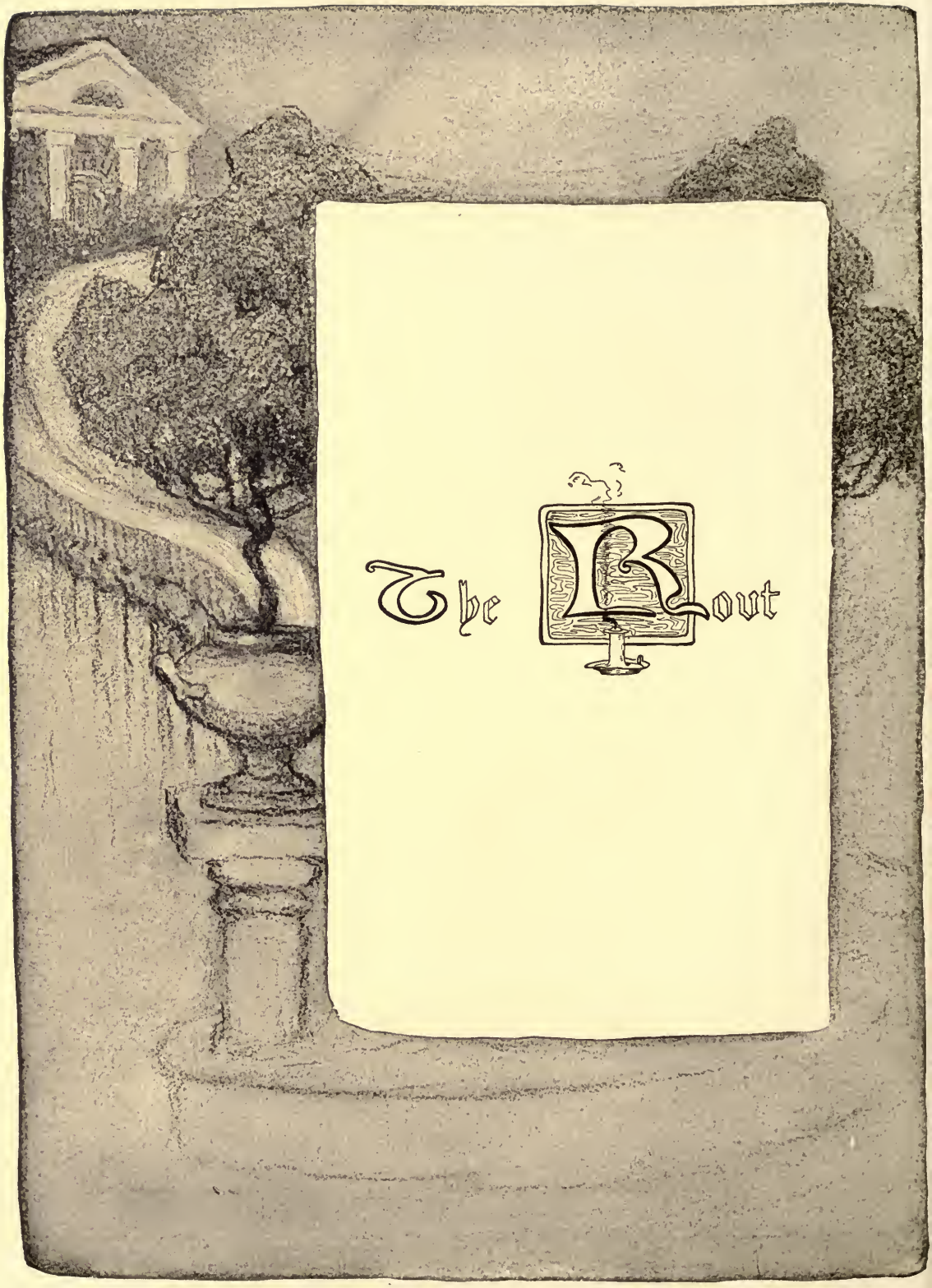


CHRISTMAS ETCHINGS

Christmas in the North; and wide
  And wan the world lies cold
In winter-burial deep of snow
  That hides each field and fold;
And all is still between the vast
  Black sky and vast white earth,
And life and love have crept within—
  To shelter at the hearth.

Christmas in the South; and warm
  And brown the earth is stretched—
And where yon dark field meets the
    clear
  Soft rim of night, is etched
A lovely, luminous silhouette
  Of flocks and shepherds calm,
And one large, melting Star that
    hangs
  Low in a sky of balm!

The Rout


The Rout

THE ROUT

What shall we do, my heart and I,
  Guests here at Life's gay rout,
If e're the long, long night has waned
  The dreams should all go out?

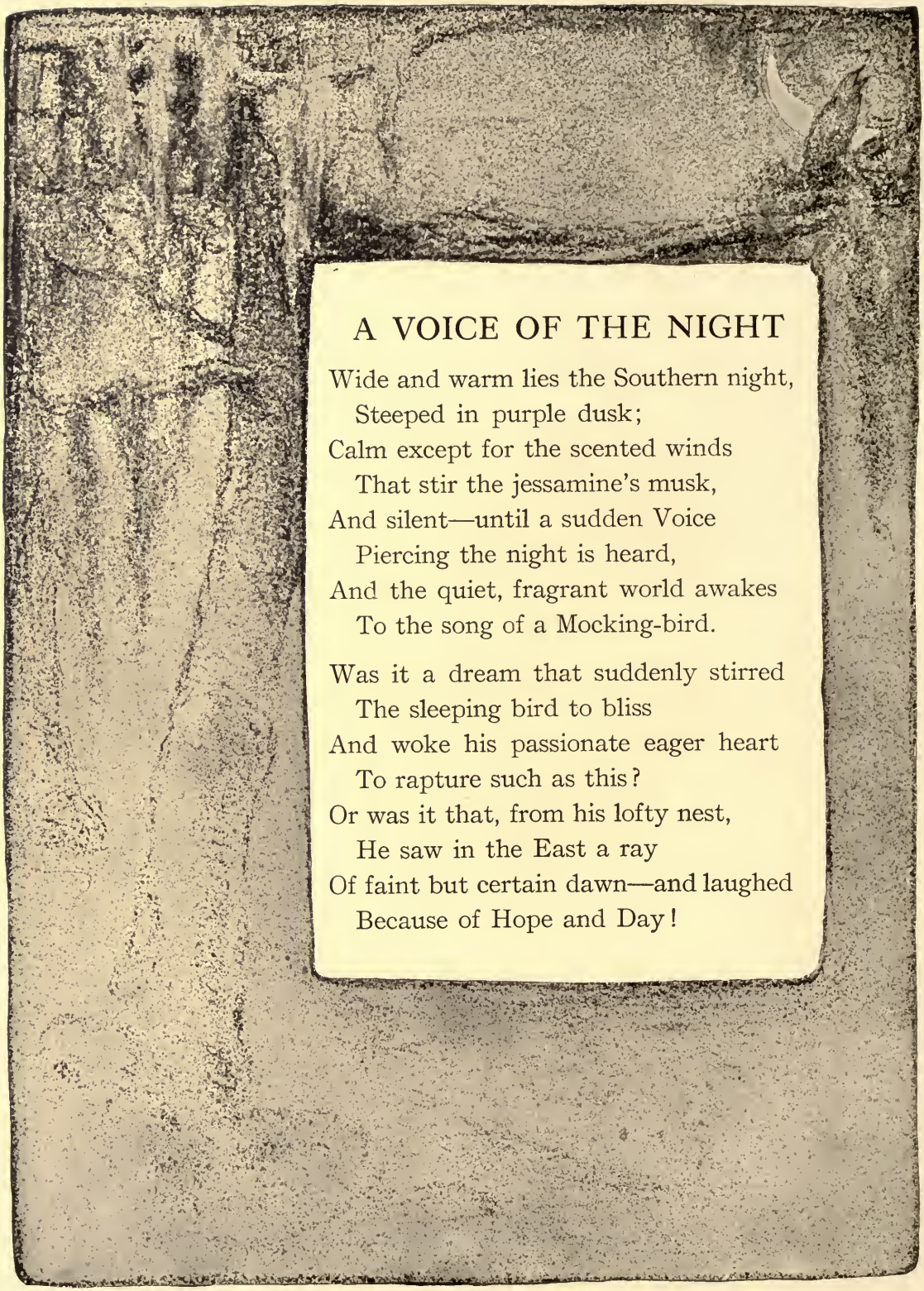
The dreams that lit the tinsel place
  With radiance strangely fair,
And made its crowded loneliness
  A borrowed joyance wear!

The dreams that touched our pulses till
  The throbbing veins ran wine,
And kept us glad and unafraid
  And young and half divine!

The dreams that helped us to forget
  How dull the hours had grown;
How many revellers we loved
  Had said "Good night"—and flown.

What shall we do, my heart and I,
  Late guests at Life's poor rout?
We are so far from home, and see!
  The dreams are going out!

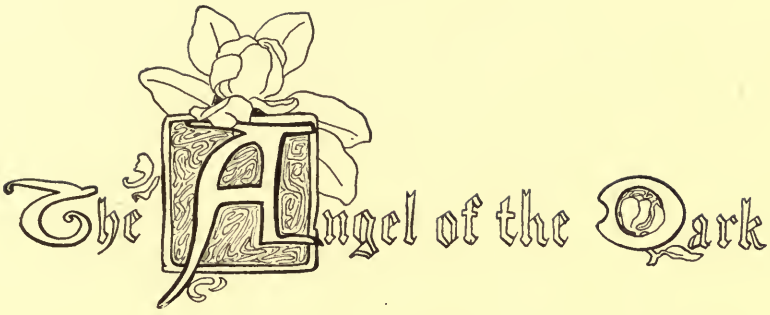
A Voice of the Night

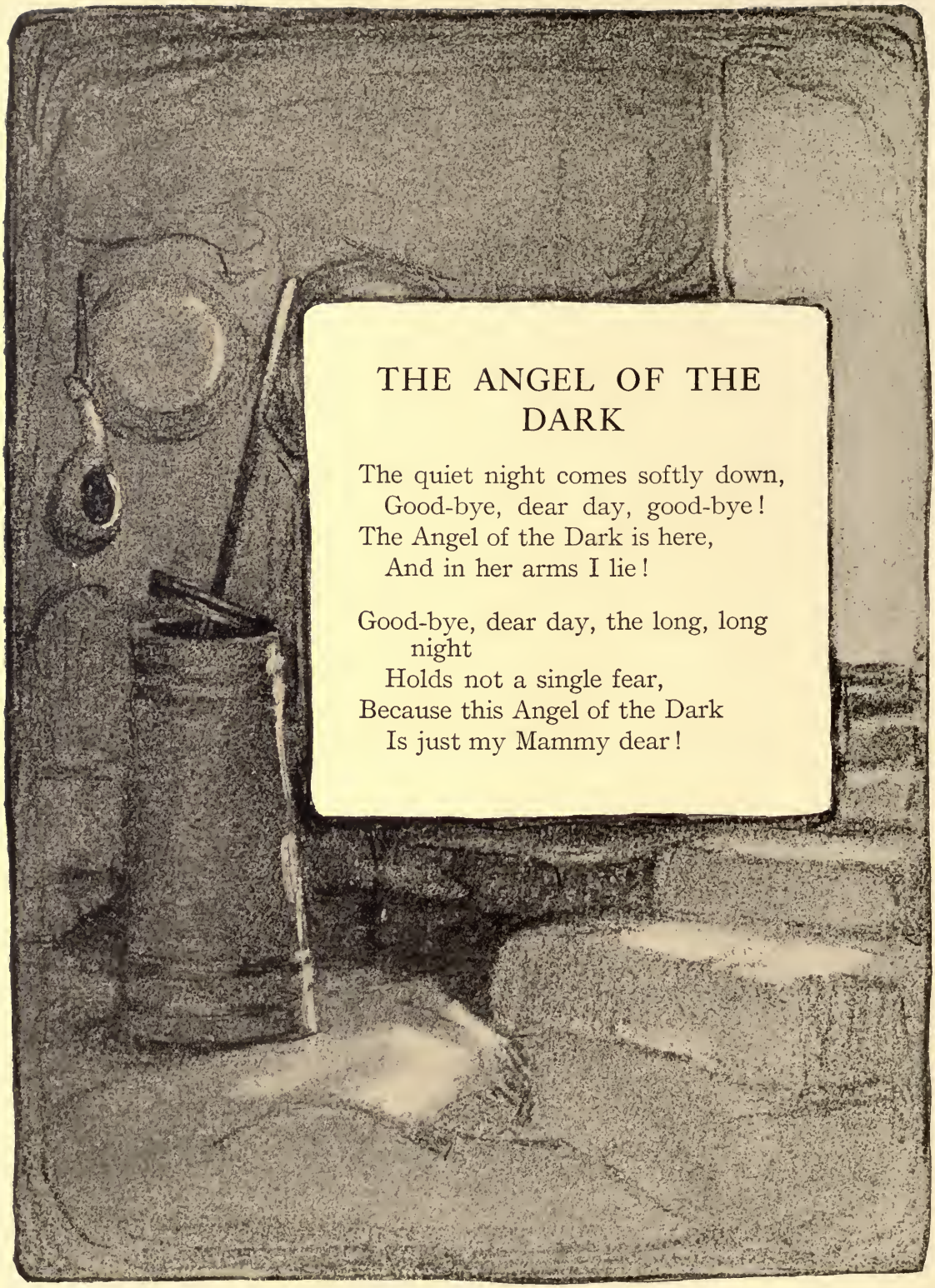


A VOICE OF THE NIGHT

Wide and warm lies the Southern night,
  Steeped in purple dusk;
Calm except for the scented winds
  That stir the jessamine's musk,
And silent—until a sudden Voice
  Piercing the night is heard,
And the quiet, fragrant world awakes
  To the song of a Mocking-bird.

Was it a dream that suddenly stirred
  The sleeping bird to bliss
And woke his passionate eager heart
  To rapture such as this?
Or was it that, from his lofty nest,
  He saw in the East a ray
Of faint but certain dawn—and laughed
  Because of Hope and Day!


The Angel of the Ark

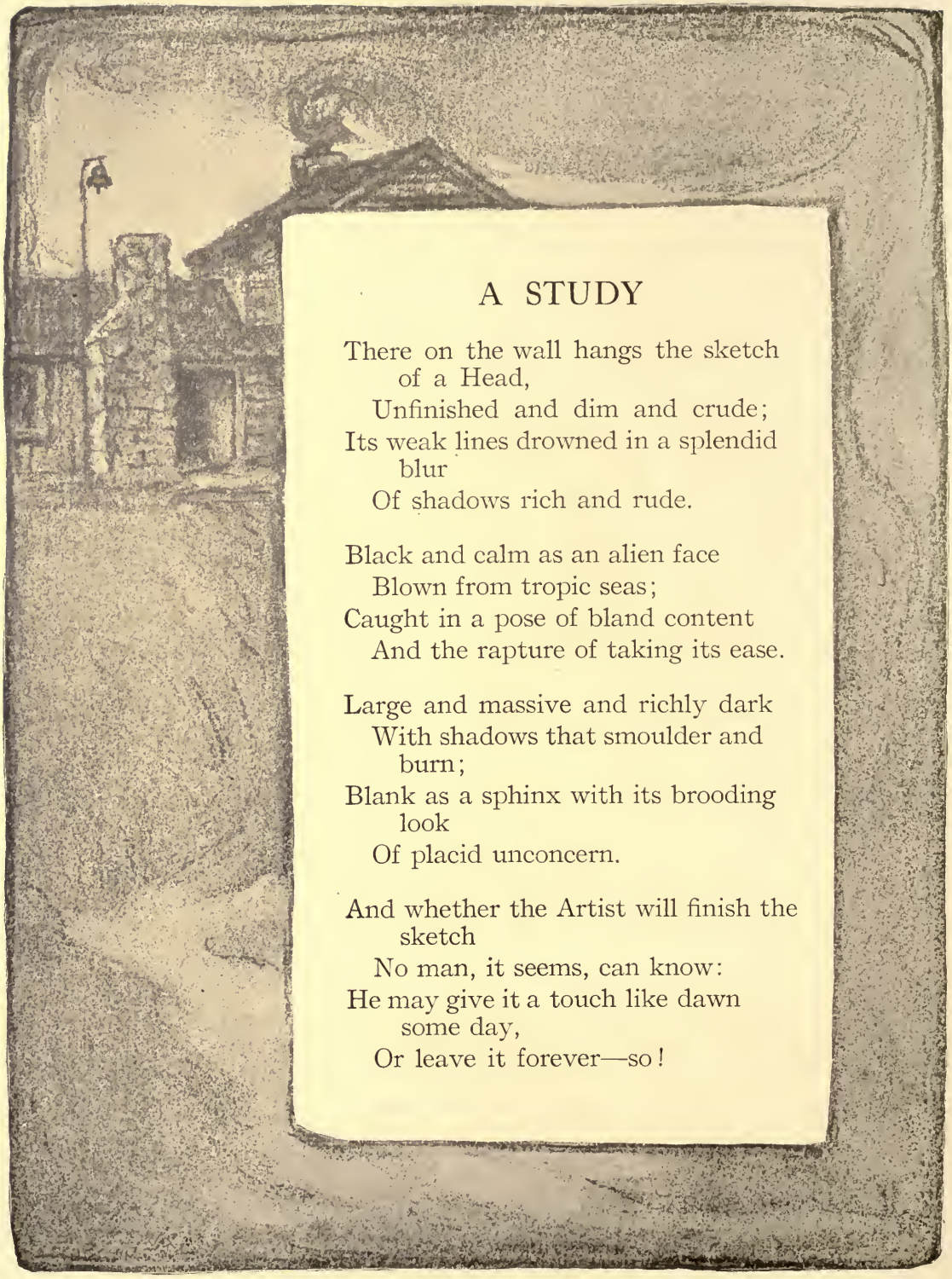


THE ANGEL OF THE DARK

The quiet night comes softly down,
  Good-bye, dear day, good-bye!
The Angel of the Dark is here,
  And in her arms I lie!

Good-bye, dear day, the long, long night
  Holds not a single fear,
Because this Angel of the Dark
  Is just my Mammy dear!

A Study



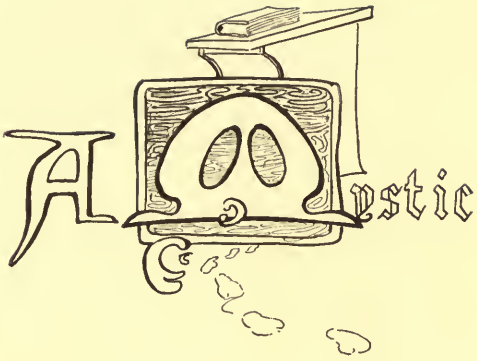
A STUDY

There on the wall hangs the sketch
of a Head,
Unfinished and dim and crude;
Its weak lines drowned in a splendid
blur
Of shadows rich and rude.

Black and calm as an alien face
Blown from tropic seas;
Caught in a pose of bland content
And the rapture of taking its ease.

Large and massive and richly dark
With shadows that smoulder and
burn;
Blank as a sphinx with its brooding
look
Of placid unconcern.

And whether the Artist will finish the
sketch
No man, it seems, can know:
He may give it a touch like dawn
some day,
Or leave it forever—so!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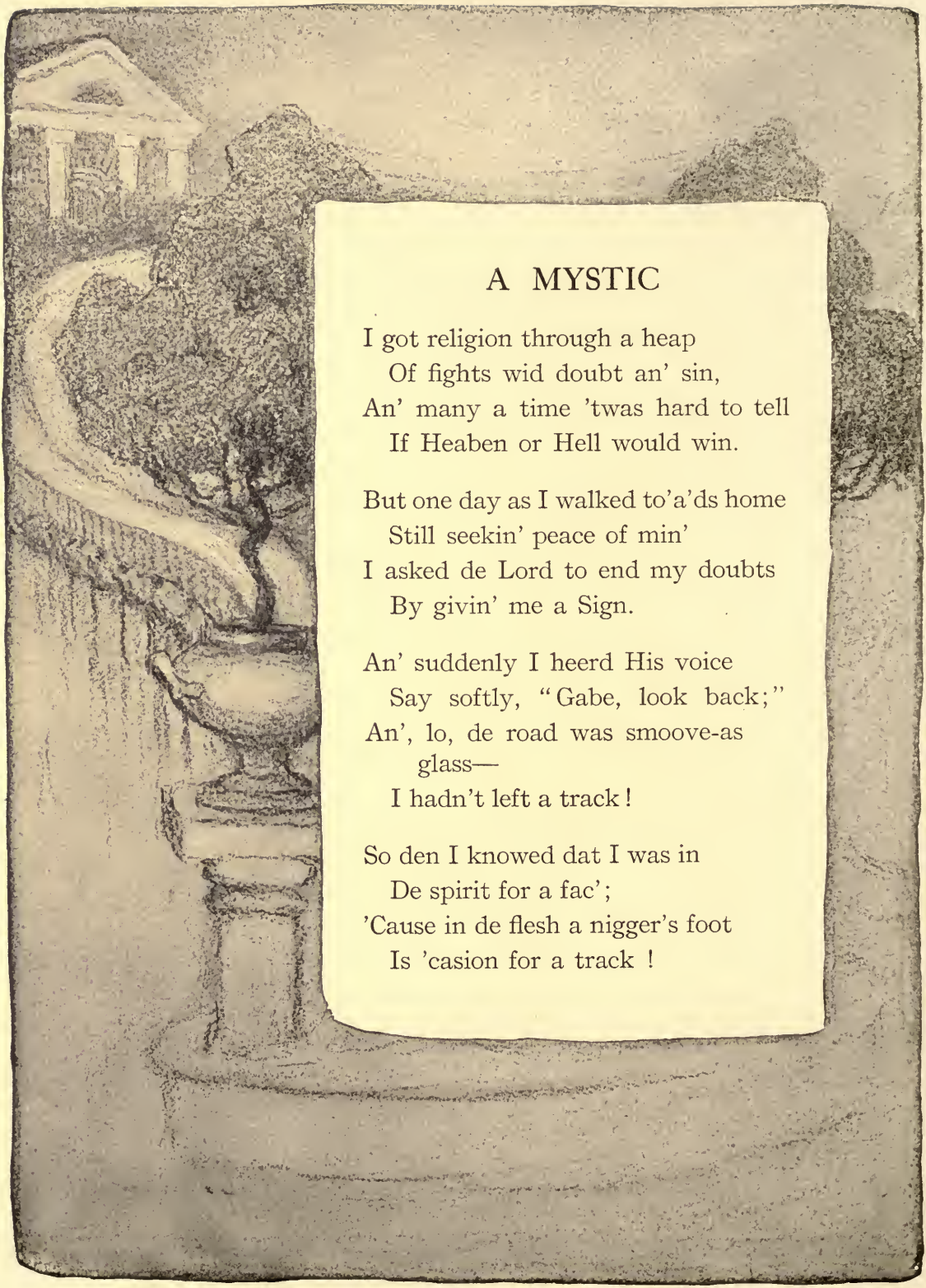


A MYSTIC

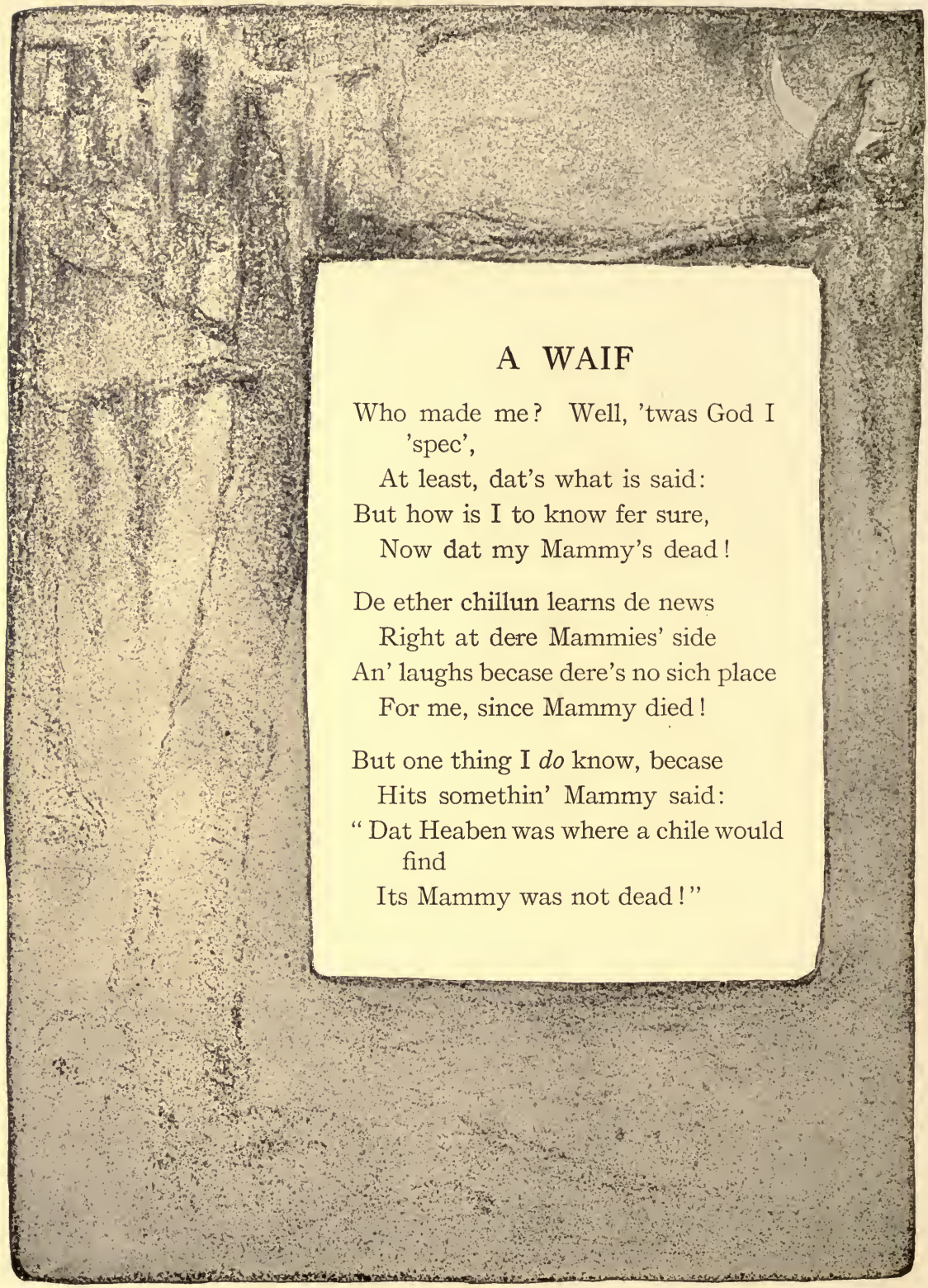
I got religion through a heap
  Of fights wid doubt an' sin,
An' many a time 'twas hard to tell
  If Heaben or Hell would win.

But one day as I walked to'a'ds home
  Still seekin' peace of min'
I asked de Lord to end my doubts
  By givin' me a Sign.

An' suddenly I heerd His voice
  Say softly, "Gabe, look back;"
An', lo, de road was smoove-as
    glass—
  I hadn't left a track!

So den I knowed dat I was in
  De spirit for a fac';
'Cause in de flesh a nigger's foot
  Is 'casion for a track!

A Wait



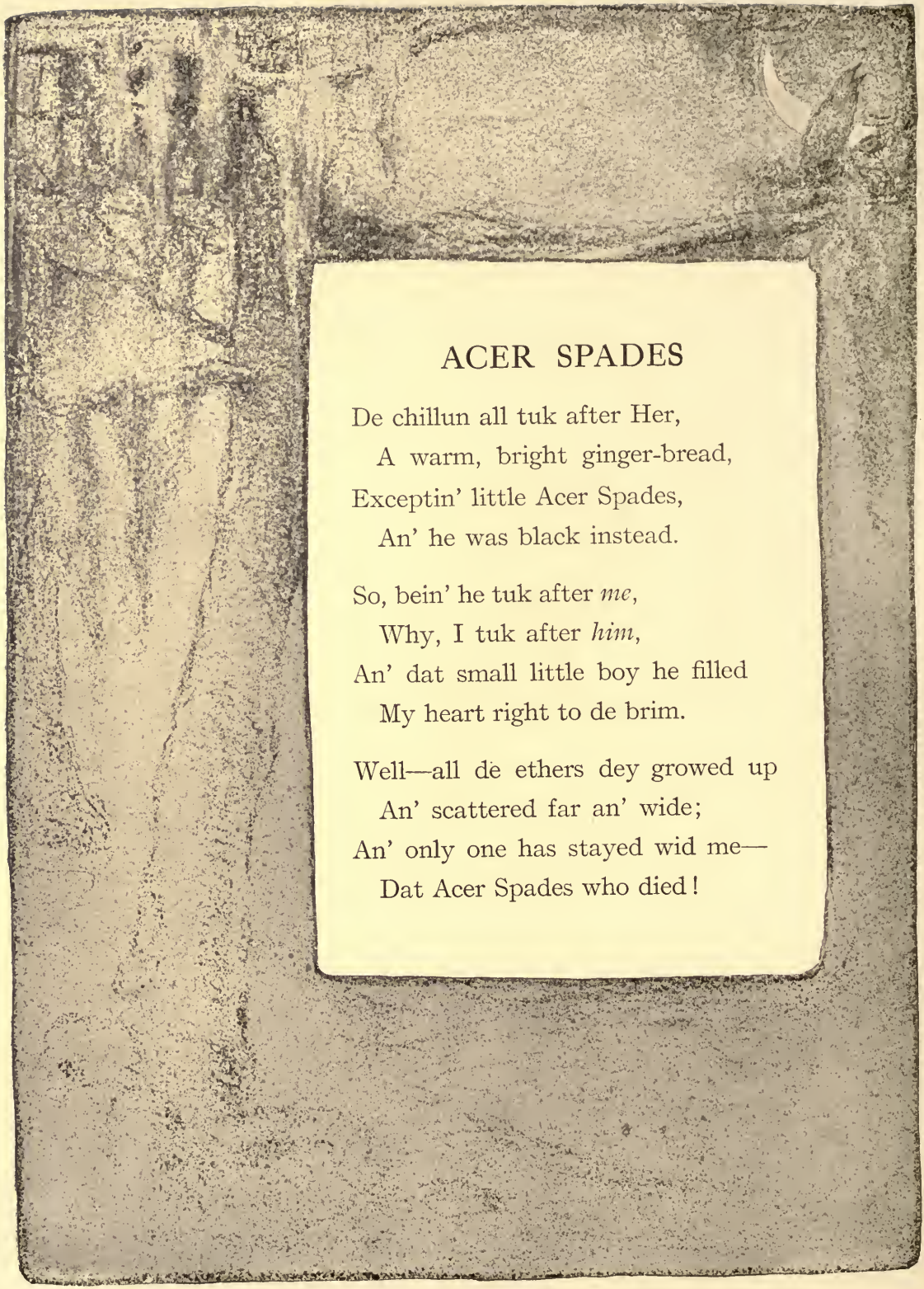
A WAIF

Who made me? Well, 'twas God I
'spec',
At least, dat's what is said:
But how is I to know fer sure,
Now dat my Mammy's dead!

De ether chillun learns de news
Right at dere Mammies' side
An' laughs becase dere's no sich place
For me, since Mammy died!

But one thing I *do* know, becase
Hits somethin' Mammy said:
"Dat Heaben was where a chile would
find
Its Mammy was not dead!"

Acer Spades



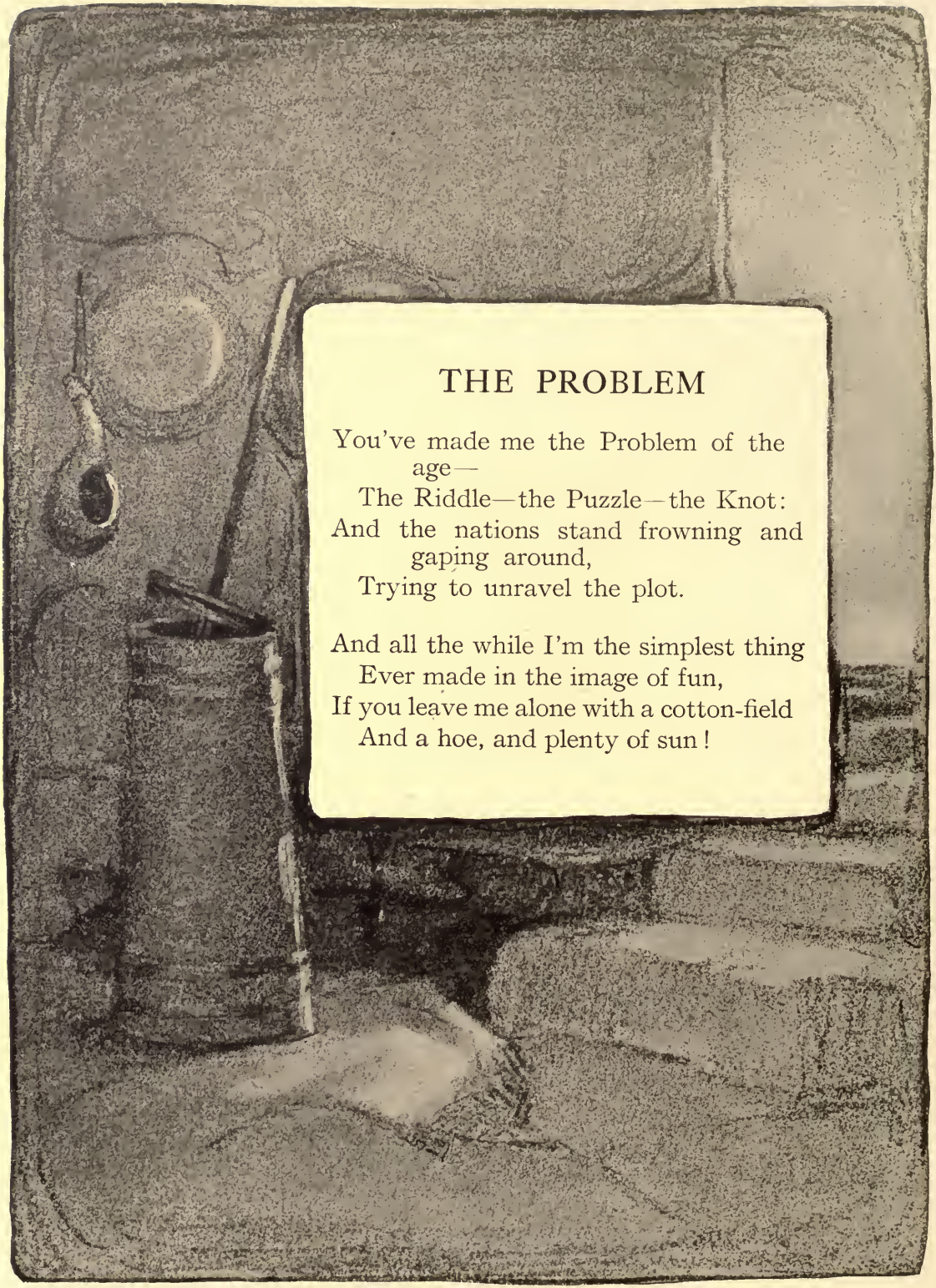
ACER SPADES

De chillun all tuk after Her,
A warm, bright ginger-bread,
Exceptin' little Acer Spades,
An' he was black instead.

So, bein' he tuk after *me*,
Why, I tuk after *him*,
An' dat small little boy he filled
My heart right to de brim.

Well—all de ethers dey growed up
An' scattered far an' wide;
An' only one has stayed wid me—
Dat Acer Spades who died!

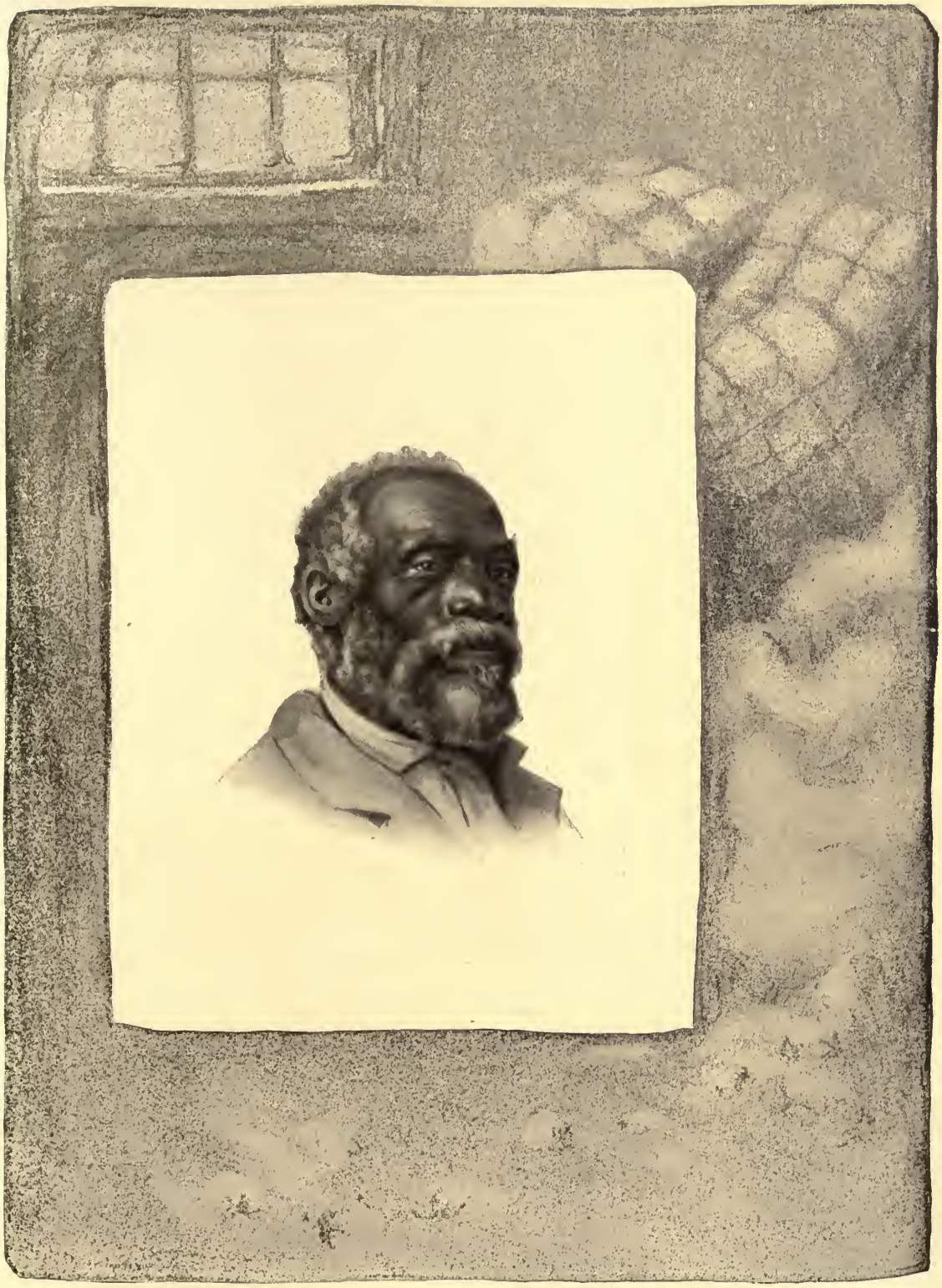
The Problem

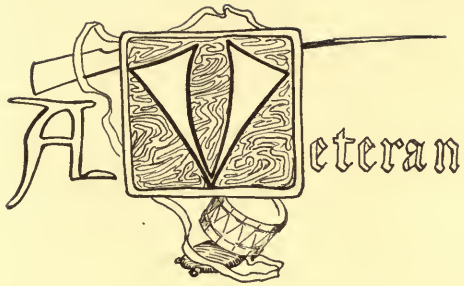


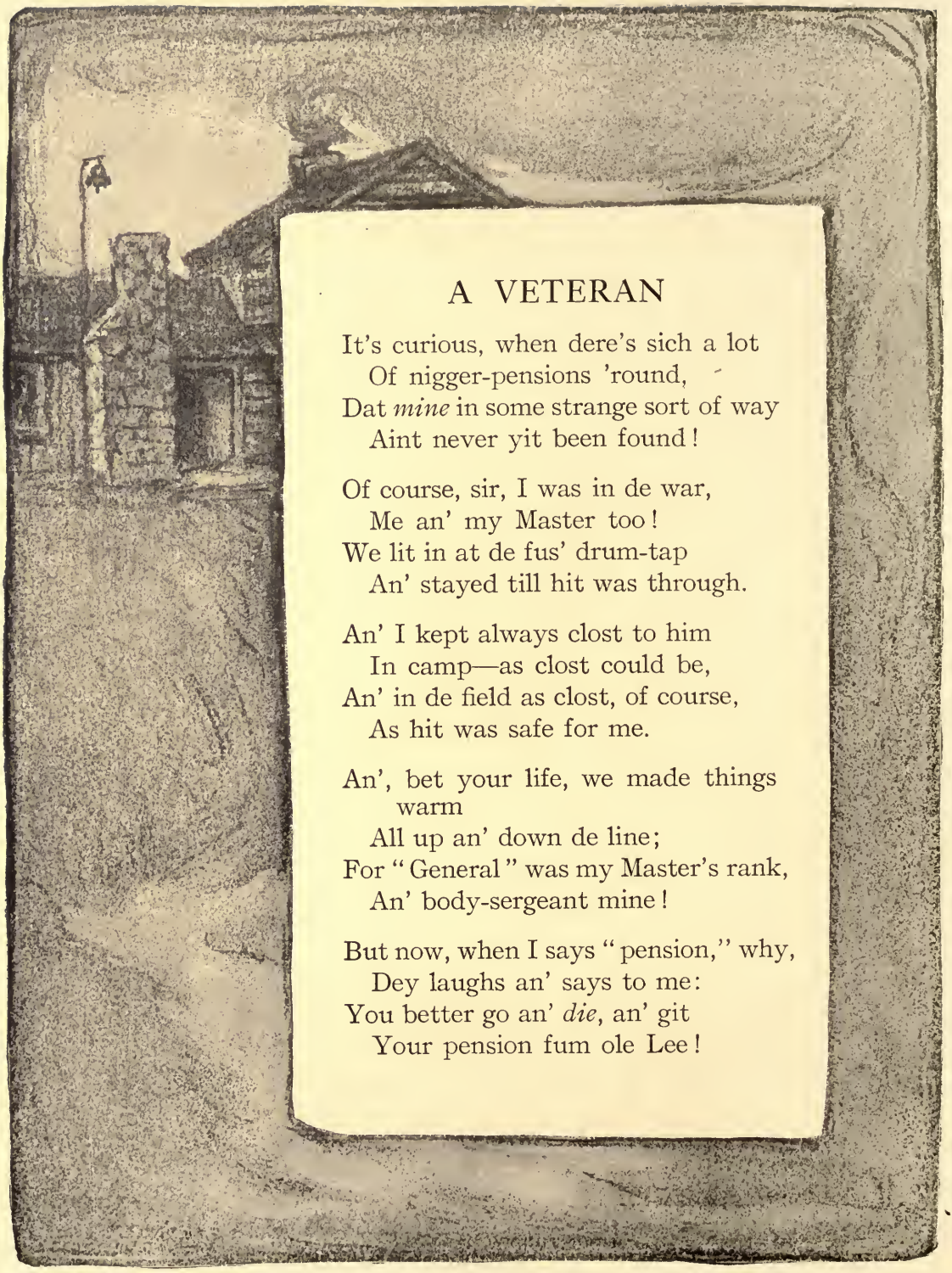
THE PROBLEM

You've made me the Problem of the age—
The Riddle—the Puzzle—the Knot:
And the nations stand frowning and gaping around,
Trying to unravel the plot.

And all the while I'm the simplest thing
Ever made in the image of fun,
If you leave me alone with a cotton-field
And a hoe, and plenty of sun!




A Veteran



A VETERAN

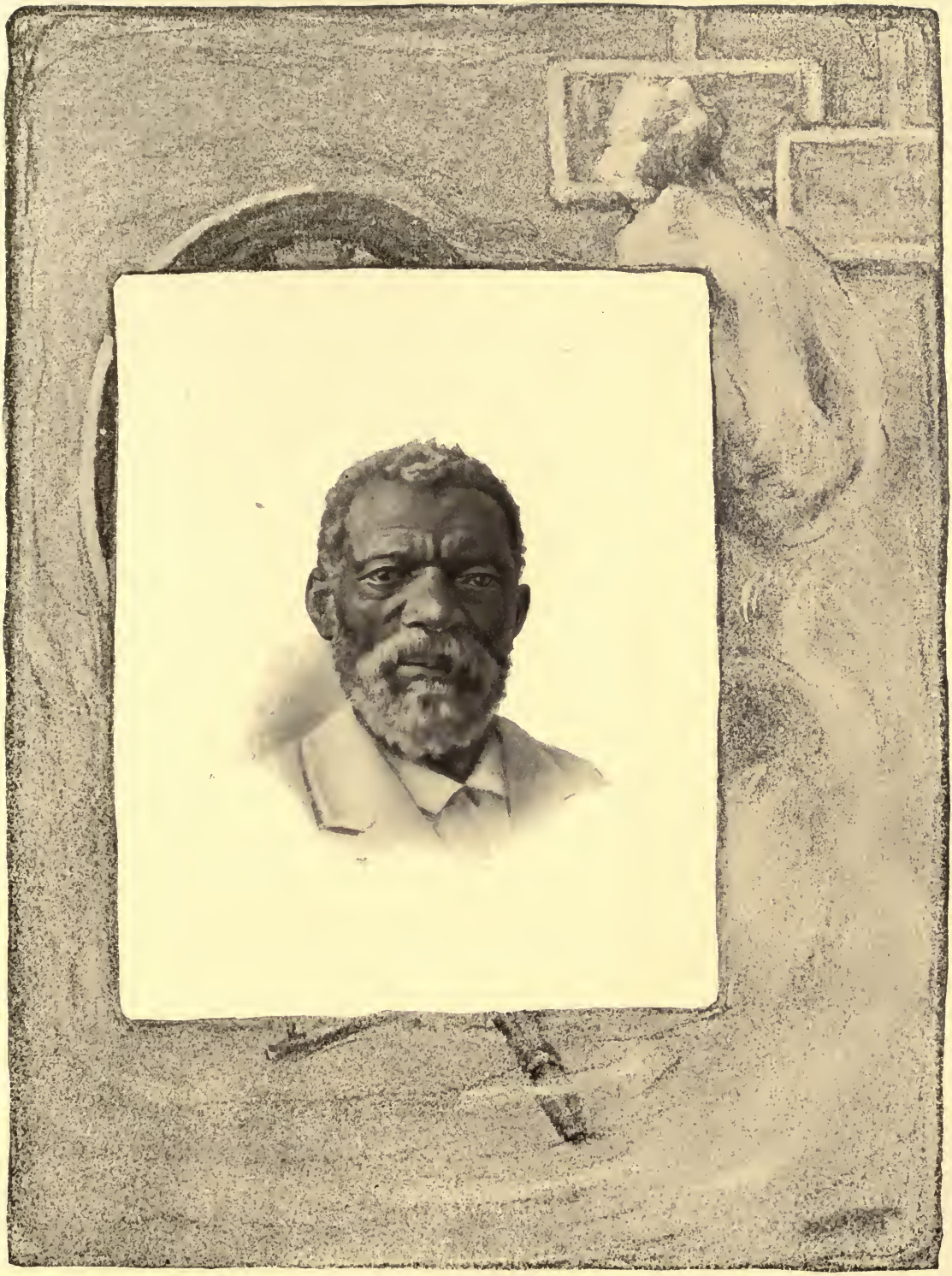
It's curious, when dere's sich a lot
  Of nigger-pensions 'round,
Dat *mine* in some strange sort of way
  Aint never yit been found!

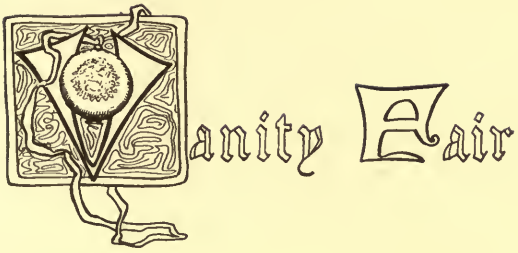
Of course, sir, I was in de war,
  Me an' my Master too!
We lit in at de fus' drum-tap
  An' stayed till hit was through.

An' I kept always clost to him
  In camp—as clost could be,
An' in de field as clost, of course,
  As hit was safe for me.

An', bet your life, we made things
    warm
  All up an' down de line;
For "General" was my Master's rank,
  An' body-sergeant mine!

But now, when I says "pension," why,
  Dey laughs an' says to me:
You better go an' *die*, an' git
  Your pension fum ole Lee!

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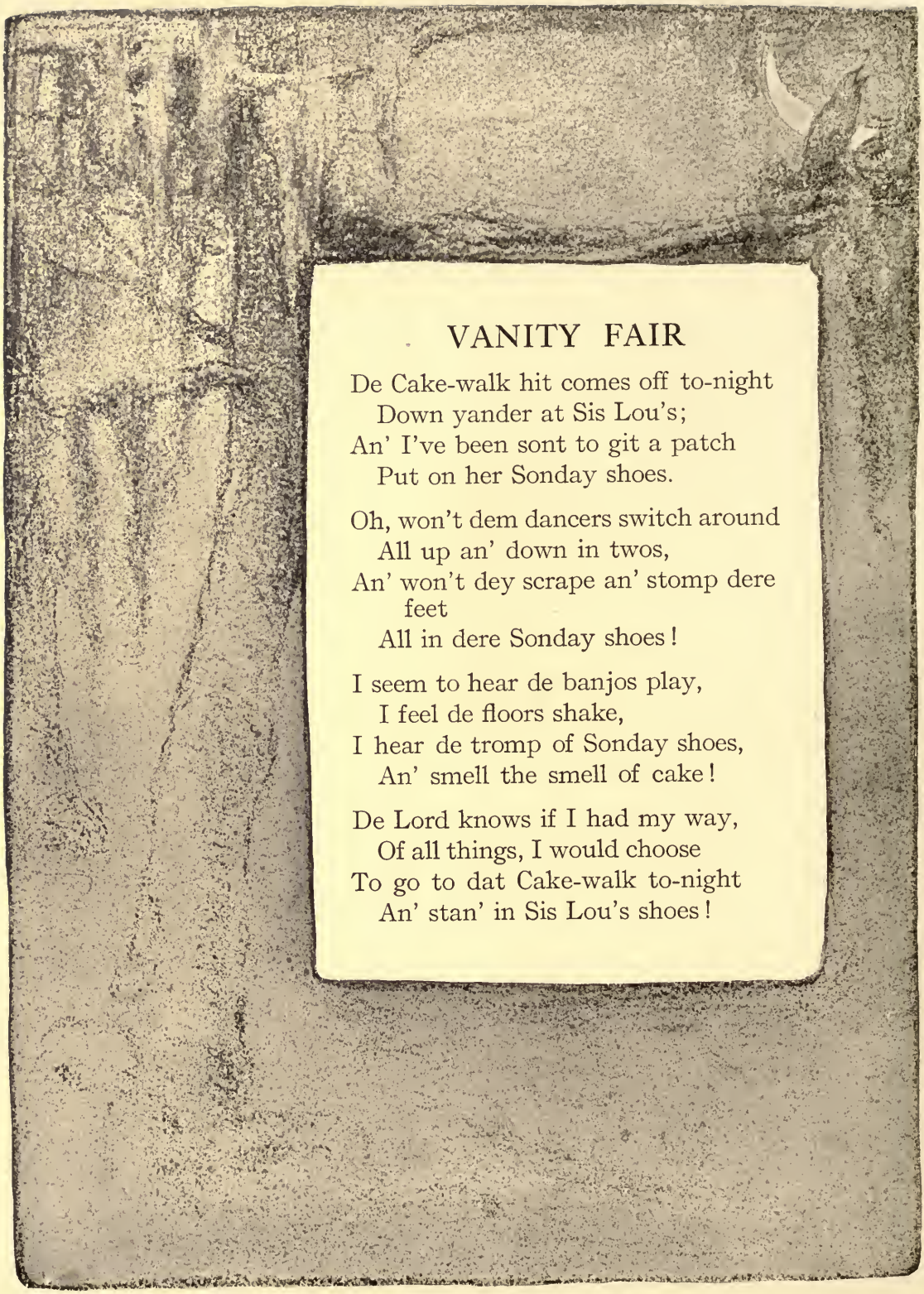

VANITY FAIR

De Cake-walk hit comes off to-night
Down yander at Sis Lou's;
An' I've been sont to git a patch
Put on her Sonday shoes.

Oh, won't dem dancers switch around
All up an' down in twos,
An' won't dey scrape an' stomp dere feet
All in dere Sonday shoes!

I seem to hear de banjos play,
I feel de floors shake,
I hear de tromp of Sonday shoes,
An' smell the smell of cake!

De Lord knows if I had my way,
Of all things, I would choose
To go to dat Cake-walk to-night
An' stan' in Sis Lou's shoes!

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